

On Theatre's Responsibility in the Spectacle of Climate Change

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1. To See

Death is knocking on our planet's door. In its report from April 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that, unless radical steps are implemented right away, very soon no measures whatsoever will be of any help. The report states that "limiting global warming will require major transitions in the energy sector."¹ I am afraid that a change of habits is necessary not only in energy sourcing but also in our daily practices and our relationship towards the fundamental values of contemporary society and culture. "Post-truth" needs to learn its lesson! That's what this is all about.

2. To Ask

The ice is melting on the Earth's poles. Globally, the average temperature has gone up by 1.5° C. CO₂ emission is the highest in the history of humankind. The ocean and sea levels are rising. An ecological catastrophe with deadly outcomes is in the offing.

What will life be like for those who manage to survive? Will they have to exit the protected zones only with breathing gear, as if they were diving in the ocean depths?

Is the theatre's task to portray the catastrophic situation that is in the making? Is it the theatre's job to scare us with an apocalyptic image of the enfeebled life that is coming? Is it theatre's task, perhaps, to present through dramatic situations the social conditions dominated by the drive for power, which, in reality, is the real cause of the ecological catastrophe?

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1. The Summary for Policymakers of the IPCC Working Group III report, "Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change," was approved on 4 April 2022, by 195 member governments of the IPCC, through a virtual approval session that started on 21 March. It is the third installment of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), which will be completed this year (IPCC 2022).

3. To Name

What are we talking about when we talk about ecological catastrophe?

When we talk about ecological catastrophe, it is as if we are talking about a natural catastrophe, isn't it? But, the approaching ecological catastrophe is not a natural phenomenon. It comes from nature, but as a response to an action that does not come from the natural but rather the social sphere. Where exactly is that action coming from; what is the cause of such a fatal response, of the mortally wounded natural world? That is the key question.

It became a habit to say that climate change is the cause of the impending ecological catastrophe. Even the IPCC, the central UN body in charge of analysis and prevention of ecological catastrophe, has in its title the phrase "climate change." However, the climate change we are experiencing is caused by an ecological disturbance, which is brought about by global warming, generated by irrational exploitation of natural resources and devastating pollution. Therefore, "climate change" is a relevant, but second-degree idea, extrapolated from the fundamental problem of "global warming."

Regardless of this causal order of pollution causing global ecological changes, among which is global warming, these days there is an emphasis on the phrase "climate change." That expression is relatively old, and it refers primarily to natural, cyclical changes of long duration. Climate change is a process that takes place in nature, and as such it is well known to science.² However, the contemporary use of the term "climate change" does not pertain to that natural process of long duration, but instead is used to replace the phrase "global ecological change," which entails global warming. Therefore, instead of the old meaning of this term, which names the natural process of the changing climate, the same phrase covers something completely different, which has nothing to do with the natural phenomenon: it is a rapid change of climate caused by radical exploitation of nature. Even NASA on its website privileges this terminological choice as validated by science: "So 'global climate change' is the more scientifically accurate term. Like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we've chosen to emphasize global climate change on this website, and not global warming."³

Using the term "climate change" obfuscates the causal order of events. When today we say "climate change," even if it refers to an unnatural act, it still carries the semantic appearance of a natural, long-lasting process. That is how a semantic confusion was created. Semantic confusion hinders a rational analysis of empirical facts.

The phrase "climate change" was promoted as the primary idea to replace "global warming" and to relegate to the background this phrase that clearly situates the political and economic responsibility for the imminent ecological catastrophe. This is an example of ideological repression by means of naming; it is a semantic violence that inevitably has a detrimental impact on the way we see reality.

The notion of global warming clearly points to causes of ecological catastrophe, which comes from an excessive, irrational (moreover, unreasonable) exploitation of natural resources, or simply put, exploitation; or even more precisely, the oppression of nature and the increase of an excessive, unjustifiable (moreover, unreasonable) pollution. Instead of "global warming," the term that designates the direct responsibility of multinational corporations and the culpability of economic superpower governments, the notion of "climate change" shifts blame to nature itself.

2. "Cycles also play key roles in Earth's short-term weather and long-term climate. A century ago, Serbian scientist Milutin Milankovitch hypothesized the *long-term*, collective effects of changes in Earth's position relative to the Sun are a strong driver of Earth's long-term climate, and are responsible for triggering the beginning and end of glaciation periods (Ice Ages)" (Buis 2020).

3. To a scientist, global warming describes the average global surface temperature increase from human emissions of greenhouse gases. Its first use was in a 1975 *Science* article by geochemist Wallace Broecker of Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory: "Climatic Change: Are We on the Brink of a Pronounced Global Warming?" (see NASA 2008).

Without any doubt, political responsibility for bringing the planet Earth to its terminal phase is a proper topic for theatre, because theatre's unique aesthetic property can be found in its inherently political nature—it is the art of the *polis*.

4. To Analyze

- a. Nature has been oppressed. The ecological catastrophe is nature's traumatic response to this oppression. Global warming is the result of excessive and accelerated pollution. The environmental pollution is caused by a fabricated need for excessive accumulation of wealth through excessive exploitation of nature.
- b. Nature, naturally, belongs equally to everyone. Therefore, it is a common resource. Still, privileged and powerful economic and political forces usurp the right to acquire and exploit the natural resources. That theft has been legalized; that legalization is the very being of contemporary political economy.
- c. The oppression of nature is inseparable from the oppression of people.

The examples of this are innumerable; I'll offer one:

Ten years ago, in the Republic of South Africa, 34 miners were killed, 78 wounded, and 259 arrested during a strike in a platinum mine near the city of Marikana, owned by the UK company Lonmin (globally the third largest in its line of business). The national flag was lowered to half-mast, and the Ministry of the Interior issued the statement that “the police members had to employ force to protect themselves from the charging group” (Reuters 2012). It turns out that the murder of the exploited who resist always takes place in self-defense. That's the point of view of the exploiters. They write the story line.

5. To Understand

- a. At the very root of the oppression of man and of nature, which is bringing humanity to the precipice of ecological catastrophe, is an unabashed desire for limitless profits.
- b. Enormous profits of the few are made possible by enormous impoverishment of many. Impoverishment entails debt bondage: debt bondage of individuals and families, debt bondage of entire countries.

The countries enslaved by debt are forced to give away their natural resources to multinational companies in countries that don't have to follow the legal regulations for ecological protection, even those regulations in the home countries of those very companies.⁴

- c. In that way, nature and people enter into a relation based on commerce and people themselves become commodities, thus acquiring market value but losing all other human values.

6. To Show

Theatre faces the challenge of exposing the ecological catastrophe and showing it in its true light, as a social catastrophe. As we have recognized in this analysis thus far, the usurpation of natural resources is made possible by the usurpation of social resources.

The substitution of derivative notions (such as climate change) that identify the effects for primary notions that identify the causes (global warming) closes the symbolic circle of dominance over nature, which also prohibits the very possibility of an efficient response. That closed circle locks out any chance for social change. If I don't know the real name of the problem, I can't name

4. “A fifth of carbon dioxide emissions come from multinational companies' global supply chains, according to a new study led by UCL and Tianjin University that shows the scope of multinationals' influence on climate change” (UCL News 2020).

the action for its solution—I can't conceptualize a possible praxis. Theatre is an experimental form of potential (and possible) praxis that takes place in social reality.

The theatre that doesn't recognize the semantic substitution is an ignorant, or passive theatre. The theatre that recognizes this semantic surrogation but does not dare to name it is a coopted, opportunistic theatre that puts itself in the service of social oppression—which is, at its very core, also the oppression of nature.

The two most common means theatre uses to avoid naming the problem—and here we are not talking only about the problem of the ecological catastrophe—are: a) spectacularization of the topic; and b) topic replacement (as in thesis replacement).

Against Spectacularization I

An example of the use of spectacle to conceal the very substance of a problem and avoid its naming can be found in Jan Fabre's acclaimed spectacle *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy: A 24-hour performance* (2015).⁵

This performance was unanimously well received everywhere, despite its avoidance of some important questions (see Coveney 2017; Chow 2018). Fabre recognizes the importance of power, but does not get engaged in analyzing its structure, so that he doesn't identify those who hold it by their real names, the way in which Aristophanes did in ancient Greece.

One of the high points of the performance features an exhausting Spartan exercise that includes enthusiastic audience participation. Fabre staged a scene like a US Marines military drill but did not go further to explore the level of force demonstrated in the drill, so we never reach the full realization of the level of violence and cruelty that the US can mete out—as, for example, in the Guantanamo Bay prison.

At one point in the performance, the ancient Greeks adopt the appearance of the people from various tribes that they had colonized and considered barbarians; Fabre did not even consider looking at more recent, still fresh, examples of colonization from the past—for example, the genocide that his native country of Belgium committed in the 19th century by viciously annihilating 10 million people in their colony, the Congo. The wealth Belgium took from the country and on which it stands to this day, makes it possible for the artist Fabre to stage performances of great length, supported and applauded by, among others, those who with their political and economic decisions are still destroying entire communities and populations.

I would not talk about this updating of the tragic content if it was not Fabre himself who was doing that in his flirtations with the topic of Greek tragedy. His Agamemnon, who is clad in full military attire with armor and shield, also sports fashionable sneakers. Ancient Greeks, stripped of clothing, as they were in battle in the hippodrome, are dancing to modern Greek sirtaki music. But Fabre stops there, so that in the end, with frenetic approval of the audiences worldwide, his Greek joyous warriors exclaim that everyone has the right sometimes to let go and be mad, but he doesn't go as far as to show in that image, in which he brings together the present with the past of 2,500 years ago, the true meaning of that Greek madness, which is today a forgotten wisdom.

Madness, 2,500 years ago, was the primary instigator of the "Greek miracle" that simultaneously gave birth to democracy, dialectics, and theatre. One key event is the moment when the ingenious lawmaker, merchant, and poet Solon enters Athens and prohibits debt bondage in one fell swoop. From a contemporary perspective, that is madness.

5. Producer—Troubleyn/Jan Fabre (Antwerp, BE); coproducers—Berliner Festspiele/Foreign Affairs (Berlin, DE), Concertgebouw Brugge (Bruges, BE), and Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam (Julidans festival, NL) with the special support of the City of Antwerp (BE).

In our own time, a similar possibility was presented to Greek Prime Minister Alexi Tsipras. However, while making a promise in his election campaign, Tsipras did not dare to make the move for which Solon has been acclaimed as one of seven wise men. The acceptance of debt bondage by modern Greece is a fresh wound on the body of Europe, a wound from which gushes the blood of its future. That was the end of a possible and probable beginning, of a new conception of relationships between states, between peoples, between individuals, and between humanity and nature. Debt bondage remains in power.

Fabre did not dare to name it, and that is why his magnificent show belongs to the society of the spectacle: a grandiose performance without a grain of subversion. The true theatre, as conceived by the ancient Greeks, is a subversive institution of civilization. The purpose of all other institutions is to maintain established order. Only theatre is perpetually dissatisfied with the existing state of affairs. It presents a potential disruption of order. That is why all forces of the existing order aim to domesticate and tame theatre.

Against Spectacularization II

When it spectacularizes the subject of the ecological catastrophe, theatre often effectively stages the scenes of the impending Armageddon without pointing to the source of the problem.

The dance theatre performance *Traces* (2018), directed and choreographed by another Belgian choreographer, Wim Vandekeybus, is an example of this approach (see Veneruso n.d.). It is a pseudo-activist tragicomedy in which nature supposedly strikes back: the falling trees are killing the men who are cutting them. Of course, the trees are not killing those who are sitting in corporate offices and making decisions, just the lumberjacks. In the same show, bears are devouring their captors. Of course, not those who are sitting on the boards and administrative councils of creative industries who are funding these and other uncritical and supposedly ecologically minded performances, but poor, homeless Roma, who live in the woods and train the bears to perform in fairground shows, so that they can eke out a living.

Instead of critically exposing stereotypes, theatre more often supports them.

7. Topic Replacement

In theatre, it is often profitable to exploit the topic of ecological catastrophe. That happens when one doesn't mention its social and economic causes. Instead, one shows only scenes featuring consequences. Finally, being a global issue, this topic gives theatres and theatre artists a halo for their apparent concern for all of humanity.

The topic of care for ecosystems is especially welcome in societies that are fatefully marked by other collective traumas, such as war crimes, nationalism, poverty, corruption, censorship, authoritarianism, and officials in power who are above the law and are at the same time responsible for the most serious crimes against the state.

An example of this subterfuge, of this irresponsibility in a state that epitomizes all of the above-mentioned problems, could be seen in last year's Belgrade International Theater Festival (BITEF),⁶ which takes place every fall in the capital of Serbia. It was not an accident that in 2021

6. Marginalized since the 1990s, BITEF was one of the most important theatre festivals in Europe from its establishment in 1967 until the end of the cold war in 1989. It was the gathering place for the most significant performances, most important artists, and the leading theatres from the West and from the East. It was the unique site of the encounter of two ideologically and politically opposed realms, united in their common desire for aesthetic experimentation. During that period, BITEF presented the works of artists and theatre groups such as Jerzy Grotowski, the Living Theater, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Luca Ronconi, Peter Brook, Peter Stein, Richard Schechner, Jean-Louis Barrault, Eugenio Barba, Maurice Béjart, Yuri Lyubimov, Anatoly Efros, Giorgio Strehler, and many others.

the festival was publicized as a “spectacular edition,” which under the slogan “On the Edge of the Future” took “climate change” as its main theme: “It is a vision of the world that arose, among other things, from the awareness of the global environmental crisis, and the possible cataclysm, which are also the themes of the festival” (McCann.co.rs [2021?]). It was a safe subject that didn’t interfere with Serbian power structures and their national business.

Instead of subversiveness, theatre more often displays submissiveness.

8. Staging Responsibly

When we talk about the global problem of “climate change,” which endangers the life on Earth as such, theatre as a political art has the task to uncover the political responsibility for the causes of this problem: to point to the decision-making structures that have the power to stop the process of challenging nature and warming the planet. But, aren’t those the very same structures that are causing the problem? Who then is going to solve that problem? How do we stop further global pollution? Theatre has the power to point to new frameworks for organizing our societies. Experimental theatre can build a living image not only of the society as it is, but as it can be. Theatre is commonly in service of the existing power structures, but it can also become the institution of an open society that as yet does not exist, but which is possible and probable.

From Aeschylus and his trilogy *Oresteia*, or more precisely from its concluding tragedy *Eumenides*, the theatre asserted itself as the court of rightness itself, the court of justice above the law, which is all too often in the service of those who have the power to tailor the statutes to their own advantage. Our theatre has the potential to serve as a present-day Areopagus but in reality this has not yet happened. The theatre, therefore, always deliberates and judges. Because of that, unlike all other state institutions, it is an institution of justice, not just of the law. Theatre is not only an artistic but also a social act par excellence. To reach a catharsis means to turn a theatre audience into a community, and most importantly in places where a sense of community is missing, where real social relations have been manipulated and denied.

Therefore, when they talk about the problem that is today, not accidentally, erroneously identified as climate change, it is imperative for theatre-makers to first expose the semantic confusion. To use the correct name for the causes that have led to the accelerated warming that has triggered the melting of polar ice caps, overheating of the atmosphere, and the sudden change of climate conditions, means to unmask the vast spectacle produced under the label “climate change.” Those who are generating this semantic confusion are in the service of those who are producing the global warming. And who are the producers of global warming? Those who are reaping huge profits from sudden changes in nature! Yes, the theatre can serve as the Areopagus of our age and its artists pass judgment on them. Such an effort does not promise theater-makers awards and a way to further their careers, but it points them instead to the path that Aeschylus took: he had to go into exile from Athens to Sicily, precisely because of the *Oresteia*: in his theatre he conceived the Areopagus that was barred in reality.

The task of the art of theatre, from the Greeks to Ibsen, and from Ibsen to our current day, is to bring to audiences the problems for which the political, economic, and cultural elites should be held responsible.

—translated from Serbian by Branislav Jakovljević

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