

Hamlet's Being and Not-Being – Dynamics of the Aesthetic Object of Theatrical Performance

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The fundamental premise of the phenomenology of art is the distinction between artistic and aesthetic objects. The first is considered the basis for the second: the artistic object consists of sensually perceptible entities and their qualities which are presented to the consciousness of the receiver, who in turn interprets them, during so-called concretisation acts, into the aesthetic object and its qualities. Whereas the artistic object is sensual and needs material substance to exist and be perceived (including light and sound), the aesthetic object is purely intentional, since it derives from intentional acts of consciousness. What we see and/or hear (sometimes even smell, sense, and taste) is the artistic object and its features. Phenomenology insists that perception of the sensual is but the first step, which needs the next one – the concretisation acts of the receiver resulting in the formation of the wholly intentional aesthetic object of art.

Within the framework of the phenomenology of art, the dynamics of the aesthetic object of theatrical performance relates to its formation during concretisation acts of the receiver. In this respect, this dynamics is connected with ambiguities in perception and understanding of the aesthetic object – the ambiguities that form different types of instabilities in play and performance. Some of these instabilities are characteristic only of special dramatic and/or performance constructions (e.g. *mise-en-abyme*), and some seem to be specific to the art of theatre as such. The latter instabilities are not merely connected with the actual presence of the performer, but rather, and most importantly with the situation in which the actor (his body and psychomotor abilities) becomes the substance for the formation of the object of art. (The feature that is characteristic only to the art of theatre, where the artist becomes the medium for his art; only in the art of theatre does a human being act (speak and move) on behalf of an imaginative being.)

Theatrical performance is ambiguous in itself: materially and sensually it belongs to the physical, everyday world we live in, but at the same time, due to the conscious acts of the spectators, it belongs to the imaginative (fictitious), intentional world (called sometimes “the presented world”). The first is actual, the second is potential. And both exist together only during the performance.

Ambiguity (and instability) of Hamlet

Let us begin with the famous lines of Hamlet, which may serve to introduce the problem of ambiguity and instability (especially, as inscribed into the dramatic world and spoken of by

dramatis persona); the lines that refer to both of Bloom's "mysteries of Hamlet" – theatrical and visionary (Bloom 2003: 110):

To be, or not to be; that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them? To die, – to sleep, –
 [---]

To sleep! perchance to dream! ay, there's the rub;
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause: there's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long life;
 [---]

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment
 With this regard their currents turn awry
 And lose the name of action.

("Hamlet", III.i.56–60, 65–69, 84–89¹)

The question for Hamlet is not his existence and living; what he thinks of is rather the quality of his being and his actions, although not in connection with the moral norms observed within his world; these appear insufficient to resolve the problem – they do not help him in choosing the mode of action, which "is nobler". Therefore Hamlet shifts the point of reference beyond the world he knows from his experience, beyond "this mortal coil" of the world he lives in. Nevertheless, this reference does not bring him resolution; to the contrary, it becomes a subsequent source of hesitation and ambiguity. Eventually, Hamlet comes to the conclusion that it is his conscience that creates and sustains the ambiguity, and makes "the native hue of resolution [---] sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought". And one might say that it is this conscience that makes "enterprises of great pitch and moment [---] turn awry / And lose the name of action". This obviously does not mean that their effectiveness is lower; they only become less vivid, harder to distinguish and recognize. Let us notice that despite dilemmas of his conscience Hamlet is aware of his worldliness and strangely enough, by means of a metaphor of "sleep of death" and

¹ Shakespeare 1978: 134–136. I have used a bilingual edition of "Hamlet", in which English text is taken from the Arden edition of 1933 (Shakespeare 1933).

“dreams” that may come in it, he reaches beyond the world he lives and acts in².

But what does it all mean for Hamlet as a protagonist of one of the most metatheatrical plays, “[w]here all is theatricality” (as Harold Bloom suggests; Bloom 2003: 7)? Firstly, Hamlet is not (at least for Shakespeare, especially when he was writing the lines cited) a person, but a character, a literary character, and most of all a theatrical one – he was created to be staged, to speak on and off the stage. If we follow Bloom’s argument that “‘Hamlet’ establishes the limits of theatricality” and “Hamlet himself is a frontier of consciousness to be passed” (Bloom 2003: 30), then what dreams are born within the space beyond Hamlet’s worldliness if not the dreams of his spectators? It is nothing but a mechanism of “the Mouse-trap” that Hamlet prepared for Claudius whose conscience was trapped and so moved by his impressions and thoughts as a spectator of “Murder of Gonzago”. All the same, Claudius the spectator was beyond the world represented by the troupe of Hamlet’s actors.

Nevertheless, not for all the members of the audience did the performance have so equivocal a meaning. Each and every one of them reacted according to their own knowledge, experience, and sensitivity. This ambiguity of reception did not affect the ultimate meaning and purpose of the spectacle – Claudius has been “trapped”, the court has fallen into uncertainty of non-entertaining entertainment.³ Similarly – what Shakespeare apparently suggests – mental images of his receivers may well be ambiguous, and what is more, the construction of action and characters does not have to be distinctly equivocal, it may “turn awry”. Ambiguity and uncertainty is inscribed into *mise-en-abyme* – within theatre within

2 Bloom suggests (in a much broader view that should additionally support the arguments in next two paragraphs) that this would be the world of “silent Hamlet” and, paradoxically, the world of “his wake”: “What can the world do with silent Hamlet? For Hamlet, silence is annihilation. Hamlet’s wake, his name, has not been wounded but wondrous: Ibsen and Chekhov, Pirandello and Beckett have rewritten him, and so have the novelists Goethe, Scott, Dickens, Melville, and Joyce. Playwrights and novelists will be compelled to continue revising Hamlet...” (Bloom 2003: 118), and adds: “If drama takes dictionary definition, it tells a story for performance, one that begins and ends. There is an end to “Hamlet”, but not to Hamlet: he comes alive at the wake. His [---] body after four centuries, has not decayed” (Bloom 2003: 120).

3 It seems that Hamlet has transformed (inserting only “dozen or sixteen lines”) a typical play (as we and the Danish court may have expected) into an “open piece of art” and directed the performance so as to encompass all possible responses – at least it may seem so from the perspective of the practice of contemporary theatre where different spectators’ responses and accordingly different performers’ reactions are inscribed into the script of performance – there is no trace in “Hamlet” of changing the performance of “Murder of Gonzago” as a result of the reactions of Danish court spectators – all that happened was its sudden ending, which on the other hand seemed no surprise for Hamlet.

a theatre all we can do is follow Bloom's question: "Are we spectators at a play, or are we the play?" (Bloom 2003: 51)⁴.

Instability in a performing character

Although the question for Hamlet, a literary construct, is not his existence and living, but rather the quality of his being and actions, this situation changes in a theatre, where the problem of his existence appears. During the theatre performance, only the actor exists physically on the stage, whereas Hamlet does and does not exist almost at the same time; he can appear in the minds of participants and he can almost disappear as well, hidden behind the actor's phenomenal presence – in fact both situations seem to be the limit values on a scalar axis of the transparency (of a stage character) of the actor's performing presence. Bert O. States observes that Hamlet's appearance is a process of the gradual becoming of a theatrical character (States 1987: 120–121), who, on the other hand, may partially or completely vanish behind too much of a self-expressive actor's presence (States 1987: 160–170).

Every scenic Hamlet is closely related to the sensual appearance of an actor (or actress), even if the actor's semblance is completely changed. But Hamlet's existence in the minds of performance participants is not simply and directly proportional to the scale of this change, but rather to its performative quality. His existence is unstable, dependent both on the quality of actor's acting and the quality of the spectator's (mental) activity. One might say that paradoxically, the more intense the actor's personal (as opposed to – say – professional) being, the less vivid is the image of Hamlet that spectators have in their minds, and vice versa. In other words, the more the perceptual attention of the spectator is focused on the actor, his artistry, his acting and personal skills, his figure, his movements, and so on, the less it leads the imagination (and other mental faculties) to the Prince of Denmark, with his ability of solving problems of the court and state, or of performing actions at Elsinore. The actor should focus the spectator's attention on the imaginary existence of Hamlet, rather than on his or her own physical presence. However, both should appear in the spectator's perceptual system, since in the theatre, without an actor there would be no Hamlet.

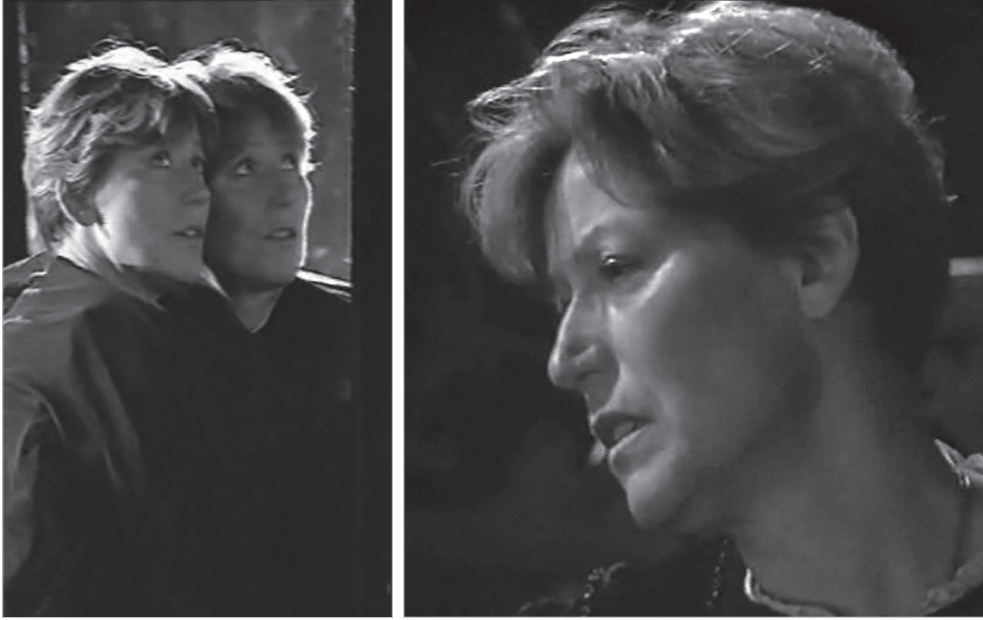
4 On the other hand, paradoxically theatrical *mise-en-abyme* provides the opportunity to grasp such an equivocal and uncertain situation in a dynamic structure of the aesthetic object of art. Bloom states: "No one, not even Shakespeare, could curtail Hamlet's largeness of being, but Shakespeare had the audacity to keep Hamlet under some control by immersing us in plays within plays within plays." (Bloom 2003: 21.)



Photo 1. “Hamlet (IV)” (1989, directed by Andrzej Wajda). Hamlet – Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska.

The above video stills (Photos 1–3) are taken from the first scenes of “Hamlet (IV)”, directed by Andrzej Wajda (Stary Theatre, Cracow, Poland, 1989), in which Hamlet was performed by the actress Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska. It can easily be seen that apart from acting skills (which according to reviewers were excellent) and the overall *mise-en-scène* (which, by the way, was interesting enough to produce instabilities on its part, mainly connected with the construction of theatre within theatre) the perceptual problem is closely linked with the fact that Hamlet was performed by a woman. This must have created quite persistent instability concerning his existence that pervaded the entire spectacle. Spectators, even those convinced to this creation, might have had even short glimpses of peripheral thoughts that they were watching a female Hamlet (which might have produced a feeling of paradox, a circumstance deliberately used by Wajda to force them to think of Hamlet’s problems and actions in more universal terms, not limited to gender, age or social status). In short, the spectators would hold in their minds simultaneously both the actress and the character, perhaps not always with the same intensity. It is hardly possible, however, that Hamlet completely “covered” the actress.

But this depicts only the perceptual, the spectator’s point of view. The other, ontological side might be accounted for in terms of the phenomenology of art. Roman Ingarden, one of the foundational thinkers in the phenomenology of art, states that the existence of e.g. Hamlet is intentional, and establishes an aesthetic object of theatrical art, whereas all sensually



Photos 2–3. “Hamlet (IV)” (1989, directed by Andrzej Wajda). Hamlet – Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska.

perceived phenomena constitute its artistic object. The artistic object forms the ontological basis for its aesthetic correlate. (Ingarden 1973 [1931].) The actor’s appearance and scenic actions form an artistic object, which is correlated with the intentional aesthetic object – for example, of Hamlet. The existence of Hamlet depends both on the intentional acting skills of the performer and the intentional mental skills of the spectator. In terms of Ingarden’s phenomenology of art, the intentional acts of performer and spectator proceed in time (and at the same time); their result is not factual, but remains intentional. This constitutes its subjectively relative instability.

States observes (1987: 160) in this respect that an actor has at his/her disposal three modes of scenic presentation: self-expressive, collaborative and representational. Each one points the attention of the audience in a different direction. The self-expressive mode points at the actor, either at himself or at his performing skills. The collaborative mode strives to engage spectators in the performance (in different submodes), thus focusing on the theatrical event itself and/or the communication between the scene and the audience. Finally, the representational mode points at the “subject matter”, e.g. Hamlet himself. And only in this third mode do a scenic character and his world appear most vividly with a minimum of non-fictional elements (i.e. the ones that are construed, perceived and understood as merely belonging to the reality of the stage and/or of the theatrical event, and that do not point to any other, imaginary realms) (States 1987: 161–185). Those modes rarely operate in

isolation: “they coexist continuously (at some level) on the same stage; one may hear them together or in succession”; States holds that from the spectator’s point of view, “it is precisely our ability to integrate them or to arrest one or another of them in our perceptual attention” (States 1987: 182–183).

However, if one considers the aesthetic object of the performance, the self-expressive and collaborative modes introduce instability within its consistency or even existence. To take the simplest example, let us think of an actor performing a character. States suggests that these form a kind of “recursive figure” (the term taken from Douglas Hofstadter 1980: 67), “whose ground can be seen as a figure in its own right”, since “the actor’s body, normally perceived as the ‘ground’ of the stage figure, suddenly becomes a figure “in its own right”” (States 1987: 156). If one thinks of the three modes, the situation seems more complex, with more dimensions of instability since there would be more “figures” (competing for attention) on the same “ground”.

Instability within the represented world

There is another instability that concerns the aesthetic object of theatre art. This one operates within a fictional world (not only during the acts of perception, but wholly in the phase of interpreting and understanding intentional objects).

States recognizes instability within the structure of the characters, which form a kind of complex dynamic system of interrelated entities that reciprocally define each other. In such a system nothing can be changed in one entity without exerting influence on all the others (States 1987: 143–156). To illustrate the problem from the point of view of perception, he gives as example the picture of Maurits C. Escher, which displays a hand drawing a hand that draws the former one (“Drawing hands”, lithography, 1948; Escher 2001: 15 – see Plate 1).

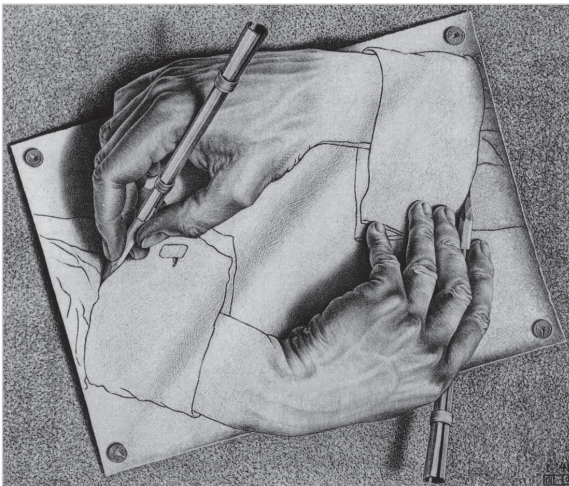


Plate 1. “Drawing hands”
by Maurits C. Escher.

This phenomenon operates with respect to distinguished figures, e.g. characters. But the same holds for all sorts of qualities and their groupings – all that is comprised within a fictional world, and ... the world itself (if we take into consideration *mise-en-abyme*, especially: play within a play and theatre within a theatre). In short, the qualities of intentional objects, actions, features etc., are unstable. In this respect one may think of many different kinds of instabilities, connected with all or almost all the qualities that can be or are recognised within a fictional world.

To take a very well known example, let us think again about Hamlet, or to be more precise, about interpretations of Hamlet in theatre and literary history. Who is Hamlet? Is he a young intellectual who talks endlessly about his existential and emotional problems but cannot take any adult, resolute action to solve them? Or is he a judicious and cautious prince who slowly, but consequently and unavoidably, aims at resolving the “rotten” problems of his state? Naturally, one can find many more interpretations, among them more refined ones, but this would render the instability even more complex.

In a way, this kind of instability is inscribed or embodied in the aesthetic object of both drama and performance (and perhaps, by extension, in the aesthetic objects of all arts). It is not only a question of the possibility of one or many interpretations, but a problem of the unstable status of the qualities of intentional objects. In terms of the phenomenology of art, this instability seems to derive from the schematic status of artistic objects, which need subjective intentional acts of concretisation resulting in aesthetic objects.

Let us note that although the example of Hamlet was connected with the interpretation of the whole (and main) character, the issue in question might be related to all kinds of qualities within the fictional world, not only complex ones, but also much simpler and even singular ones, which seems to be a more frequent situation. Again, instability depends both on the actor and the spectator. In simpler situations, the recognition of aesthetic qualities seems even more sensitive to the activity of theatre performance participants, than the recognition of aesthetic objects.

Let us note as well, that this kind of instability is especially characteristic of contemporary European theatre with its emphasis on the personal expression of an artist and/or on the communication process of a theatrical event, which may result in more or less radical transgression of existing (and shared) performing conventions. Such transgressive approaches unavoidably, perhaps even by definition, lead to perceptual instabilities, connected first of all with recognizing any object of a fictional world. If in a performance there are too many new propositions in terms of theatrical conventions, it might be quite difficult to distinguish the “figure” (fictional world, aesthetic object) from its “ground” (actor and all that is sensually perceived on and/or from the stage). This is no longer a problem of shifting the attention from the “figure” to the “ground” (and/or the other way round), but of distinguishing anything from the “ground” (which may remain a collection of separate items, movements and voices),



Photo 4. "A Dalmatian dog"
by R. C. James.

as in a picture of a Dalmatian dog (Sternberg 2001: 99; originally it was a photograph by R. C. James, see Lindsay, Norman 1984: 36), where one has to get accustomed to see anything except irregular spots and dots (see Photo 4), which form the artistic object and correspond to performers' actions and all the other sensually perceived phenomena actually presented on the stage (the Dalmatian correspond to the characters and their world).

In terms of the phenomenology of art, possible instabilities of the aesthetic object of theatrical performance are connected generally with the formation and existence of the artistic objects of theatrical performance. My claim is that such instabilities are specific and fundamental for the art of theatre, and are strictly related to its phenomenal and transient character. On the other hand, instabilities of the artistic and aesthetic objects of theatrical performance are able to produce relatively constant dynamics that enable (and invoke) strong awareness (and consequently – strong aesthetic response) on the part of the spectator.

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**Hamleti olemine ja mitte-olemine –
teatrietenduse esteetilise objekti dünaamika**

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Käesolev artikkel on katse avastada ja uurida võimalikke ebastabiilsusi teatrietenduse kunstiliste objektide loomise ning eksisteerimise protsessis. Ebastabiilsuse defineerimisel tuginetakse katastroofiteooriale kui mingi entiteedi (objekti, tegevuse, omaduse) kahe vastandliku seisundi (näiteks ontoloogilise) või omaduse (näiteks esteetilise) enam-vähem võrdse võimalikkuse tunnistamisele. Etenduse ajal on laval füüsiliselt ainult näitleja, samas kui Hamlet üheaegselt nii ilmub kui ka ei ilmu sinna: ta ilmub (vaatajate teadvuses) ning kaob (näitleja kohaloleku taha). Hamleti eksistents on ebastabiilne ja sõltub nii näitleja esituse kui vaataja (mentaalse) tegevuse kvaliteedist. Fenomenoloogias lähtudes võib väita, et Hamleti eksistents on intentsionaalne, moodustades teatrikunsti esteetilise objekti, samas kui kõik meeleliselt tajutud fenomenid konstitueerivad tema kunstilise objekti. Kunstiline objekt loob oma esteetilisele korrelaadile ontoloogilise aluse.

Esteetiliste objektide, tegevuste ja omaduste fiktsionaalses intentsionaalses maailmas leidub aga veel üks ebastabiilsus, mis on eriti iseloomulik modernsele Euroopa teatrile, kus rõhutatakse kunstniku isiklikku väljenduslaadi. Ka see ebastabiilsus sõltub nii näitlejast kui ka vaatajast, sest esteetiliste kvaliteetide äratundmine on oleneb eriti etenduses osalejate tegevusest.

Antud artikkel väidab, et seda tüüpi ebastabiilsus on teatrikunstile ainuiseloomulik ja seda põhistav, olles otseselt seotud teatri fenomenilise ja kaduva loomusega. Samas on etenduse kunstiliste ja esteetiliste objektide ebastabiilsus võimeline looma suhteliselt stabiilset dünaamikat, mis teeb võimalikuks (ja kutsub esile) vaataja tugeva teadevoleku (ja järelkult – tugeva esteetilise reaktsiooni).

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