
Learning from the Arts: Comparing postmodern Theatre and postmodern organizational consulting

Raymond Saner, Director, CSEND- Geneva¹
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www.csend.org

ABSTRACT

Organizations of the private and public sector have already been compared with the theatre (Biehl 2007 & 2003, Boje 2003, Schreyögg, 2001, Vail, 1990, Mangham, Overington, 1987;) and many authors focusing on organizational culture have consciously or unaware borrowed from the repertory of theater and dramaturgy, especially when using terms like heroes, scripts, plots, internal audiences, myths, legends etc.

While such cross-fertilization has helped illustrate some of the dynamics of organizational life, little has been done in regard to direct comparison between contemporary theater and contemporary organizational practices. The goal of this presentation is to move closer to both worlds and to directly compare the most recent development in both fields, namely Off-Off Broadway Theater with contemporary Management consulting or Off-Off Wallstreet Consulting (OOW).

The basic findings suggest that both OOB and OOW show manifestations of postmodernism and that both are signs of the times pointing at a possible paradigmatic shift of Western industrialized countries towards a postmodern way of being in this world or possible heralding a reverting back towards a pre-modern state of being analogous to the previous turn-of-century period of symbolism and neo-classicism.

Introduction

While the focus of this study is on contemporary avantguard theater and 'avantguard' organizational consulting, it should be emphasised that classic and modern theater/consulting practices exist side by side with the most recent developments in both fields. But the most novel though, it is assumed, bears the most interesting fruits for comparisons.

Starting around the mid-end sixties, the world of theater witnessed the emergence of a new avantguard theater. At that time, traditional theater (classics and musicals) were produced by theater companies situated near the western part of mid-Manhattan around Broadway while intellectually more demanding new plays or new renditions of classics were given outside of the main theater district, hence the expression Off-Broadway for such modern plays or modern interpretation of classic plays.

Smaller theater which were not able to comply with the union rules of the Actor's Equity (1) staged their plays outside of the union and production regulated environment, hence their denomination as "Off-Off-Broadway". Many of them focused on new plays, revivals, classics etc. like the rest of Broadway and OB theater, other

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OOB theaters started to focus on consciousness itself and were later called "avantguard", "experimental", "art performance", "alternative" or "conceptual".

Such postmodern groups included for instance Mabou Mines, The Performance Group, The Manhattan Project, The Ontological-Historical Theater, and writer/actor/performer's such as Robert Wilson, Stuart Sherman, Alison Knowles etc. These new avantguard groups showed their plays mostly in areas of Manhattan such as the Lower East Side, Soho, Village and Brooklyn where the counter culture of the sixties flourished well and undisturbed from commercial pressures and the intellectual scrutiny of mainstream theater critics.

The features of these postmodern OOB plays were new and radically different from those shown by traditional B, OB and 'traditional OBB' Theater. They quickly outshined other OOB groups and the term 'OOB' became interchangeable with 'postmodern' for many theater critiques and practitioners. Hence, throughout the remaining part of this article, OOB stands for the postmodern variant of OOB theater.

Postmodern remains a vague term and does not enjoy full approval by many scholars and experts of the fields of art and social science. Spirited attacks on the term have been written by many, e.g. dancers Senta Driver, Sally Banes, Roger Copeland, (all in Theater and Drama Review TDR, Spring 1992).

Many of their points are well taken, others could be disputed. The aim of this paper is not a discussion of the term postmodern nor of the statements and claims made by J. F. Lyotard (1984) and Charles Jencks (1986). Instead, postmodern is used here as a historical term to describe the features of OOB Theater as it evolved from the mid-sixties to the present.

Summarizing and expanding on contributions made by Elinor Fuchs (1983), Richard Schechner (1979) and Dick Higgins (1979), I will highlight the main features of OOB Theater by contrasting it with its precursor, namely modern theater.

From Modern to Postmodern Theatre

Modern theater is characterized by a core narrative plot which unfolds in logical, sequential manner like for instance plays by Pinter, Sartre or Albee. The actors take up roles of everyday citizens who tell a story based on life's tragedies and existentialist_conflicts and the unfolding tragedy or comedy develops along a linear line starting at a beginning and ending with the last act of the play.

The goal of postmodern theater has been to dissolve existing ways of perceiving the world and one-self. The OOB play is meant to be like an event or process whereby the audience and the players/things/objects/space interact mentally. The focus is consciousness and much less emotional experience, political criticism or simple entertainment. OOB Theater's intention is to de-construct reality, not to interpret it nor to seek 'authentic' contact with the audience as was intended by the Living Theater.

Fragments of a protagonist's mind are for instance elevated to equal levels of reality and given separate roles similarly to a person suffering from personality disorder or a person experiencing states of dissociation or hallucinations or a person lying on a psychoanalyst's couch experiencing how his ID impulses are flushing into his consciousness. Sam Shephard, a well known playwright who combines pieces of storytelling with postmodern sensibility for instance states (1984):

"The stories my characters tell are stories that are always unfinished, always imagistic - having to do with recalling experiences through a certain kind of vision. They're always fractured and fragmented and broken. I'd love to be able to tell a classic story, but it doesn't seem to be part of my nature".

Another often used technique to break habitual ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the environment is the deliberate use of multiple media and multiple art forms shown simultaneously during an OOB performance, for instance by Meredith Monk, who is primarily a dancer but also uses art, sculpture and theater as equal component parts of her performance. Another example is the Wooster Group whose plays often consist of mixtures between parallel video films, acting and large scale sculpturing etc.

Being bombarded with several parallel events, the spectator's search for simple identifying cues which could help him 'guess' the meaning of the perceived bits of information remains frustrated. There is too much information to 'make sense' of. The spectator might for instance be simultaneously perceiving a film, dance or song played in parallel while the main acting scene unfolds. In OOB Theater, all awareness is treated as being of equal value, hence the terms often used to describe effects created by OOB theater plays are 'polyvalent_identity' and 'multiplex information'.

Postmodern theater has also been heralded as the great break from anthropocentric art to a new form of transpersonal or postcognitive performance ritual where reason and everyday logic are being expanded. Modern theater's normal narration is broken up into ideas, images and de-constructed fragments which form mosaic-like environments or four dimensional tableaux from which the spectator can select those bits of information which look interesting to him. Sort of a shopping mall where the spectator/client can pick from what fancies his mind at any particular moment in time.

Postmodern performances change from one performance to the next. There is no intention to repeat a play as consistently and methodologically as was for instance taught by the modern theater schools of Lee Strasberg, Stanislavski or Grotowsky. Each event or performance in OOB Theater is meant to create a new Gestalt made up of the sum total of all 'things' put and moved on stage on one hand and the spectator's mind who selectively tunes into different bits of information as he wishes.

This deconstructivist attack on conventional thinking and perceiving can be a liberating experience as is the case during many performances of Mabou Mines and Robert Forman and it can also offer pleasure especially if the de-coded material is part of a shared history or heritage which both performer and spectator share. Elinor Fuchs (1983) describes such a postmodern theater experience of a play by Daryl Chin titled "Apoplectic Fit" in PAJ 26/2, she writes:

The play proper consists of an interweaving of dozens of scene fragments quoted from or inspired by "classic" American films, interspersed with critical passages. The weaving of fragments never coalesces into an illusionist reality with plot and characters, yet coheres because the texts behind the text are part of our cultural narrative. Chin thrusts texts at his audience, books, articles, films, fiction, criticism...It is the world of textuality rather than a dramatic world that Chin is concerned with in most of his plays."

But non-narrative, non-character based postmodern theater can also be extremely shocking and disturbing if not traumatizing. Elinor Fuchs (TDR, Vol. 33, Spring 1989) describes such a scene of confusion and shock as witnessed during a performance of Karen Finley,

"Finley creates a mass of characters who erupt in jerky schizoid fragments. Stories trail off in midsentence. There are no finished narratives, and more important, as in Acker's fiction, there are no finished narrators; The mutating "I" is in turn woman, man, parent, child, all finding their level in the subterranean mesma of sexual abuse and numbing excess..."

The reason often mentioned for the use of such fragmentation techniques, according to Dick Higgins, is the search for a greater or broader identity, not a split or fragmented personality. He writes in PAJ (1979):

"But for postmodern performance artists especially recent postcognitive ones —there is not so much a question of having a multiple identity as a polyvalent one. One extends one's identity by doing a variety of things. Sometimes it even seems to be assumed that a greater identity -in the sense of a broader capability and scope- is qualitatively "better" than a lesser one".

The same critique also postulates a new maxim which supposedly rules these OOB performers stating "I am what I can do". Similar to a mediaeval renaissance man, performance artists seem to feel that they should have worked in video, cinema, dance and music. They seem to feel that their message is incomplete without such "polymathic catholicity" (D. Higgins).

Commenting on postmodern OOB theater, Richard Schechner uses the term narcissism but not from a negative clinical-pathological point of view. He simply observes that narcissism does not mean egocentricity but instead:

"To see "I" at the center of the world is a modern feeling. For the self to see itself and become involved with that reflection or doubling as if it were another is a postmodern experience. To become conscious of this doubling - to posit a third self aware of the mutuality of the other two selves, this intense "reflexivity is postmodern".

This de-struction or fragmentation of the self represents a key aspect of postmodern theater. It bears strong similarities with experiences of deep meditation, for instance Vipasana Buddhism, during which the meditator experiences similar fragmentation and self-reflexivity. The same can be said about drug induced states, especially through psychedelic drugs. Both avenues of self reflexivity have been taken by practically all of the OOB Theater performers.

Moving towards cultural pluralism or multiculturalism, American performers, critiques and theorists are incorporating more and more non-Western and non-European theater into their own theatrical performances. Americans of Asian, African and Latin American origin are especially apt at blending different cultures thereby experimenting with forms of 'global theater' and cultural pluralism, thereby doing away with mono-culturalism. (R.Schechner, 1991).

OOB Actors and Audiences

Classical and modern theater are theaters which do their best at using illusions to imitate reality. The first one, classical repertory theater does it by using established historical forms to convey meaning (e.g. operas, classical drama like Shakespeare); the modern theater does it by the use of acting methods (Stanislawsky, Strasberg) which bring the actor and the scene as close as possible to real life situations.

OOB theater however does not intend to imitate life (conventional theatrical illusion) nor does it aim to improve on an existing piece of theater nor does it look for ways to entertain in a traditional sense. Instead, OOB theater focuses on the multiple levels of conscious awareness which a spectator could experience during a given OOB performance. For the OOB audience, there is no political or social message to be 'gotten'. The only thing to get is what the spectator makes out of the fragments of information made available by the performers.

Real or quasi-real characters are avoided in OOB because the audience's consciousness would have only preconceived 'old' precepts to identify with. Instead, the OOB performers want to offer the spectators 'unpackaged' material which he then can de-construct as he sees best fit.

Hence the OOB actor tries to be several things at the same time to different people, namely for instance: a voice, a physical object, a movement in space, a color within a larger frame made up of the whole stage etc.

For the audience, this can be quite a challenge since most of them have not been trained in de-constructing environmental data nor do they necessarily seek such an experience voluntarily. The frustrating part of being seated in an OOB play is that the human being's natural need to look for the familiar and his need to complete unfinished wholes remains oftentimes frustrated and incomplete. Impressions, sounds, images, colors, lights, tones, bodies can remain without an explanatory text which would allow the spectator to fall back on a given meaning normally present in modern or classical plays.

Being most of the time unable to move around in the audience, the spectator remains a seated captive audience which has to accept "undigested" raw information and put them into a larger explanatory whole. There is nothing 'there' to look for in a traditional sense. There are only raw data to construct something.

Many spectators can keep up for a while until the information overload puts too much stress onto their mental and emotional functioning. Hence, many people fall asleep during the performance or go into some fantasy world.

OOB Theater does not compromise. There are normally no narrated stories, no psychological characters with readily recognizable personalities, no historical context of the play and no linear chronological unfolding of a story line or if so, then only in fragments.

Hence, it is up to the spectator's mind and needs to make meaning out of the information, impressions, sounds, smells etc. Participation is absolutely necessary, consumption through osmosis of a ready made play is not possible. What is possible instead is the de-construction and re-construction of available bits of information.

Staying seated in a OOB theater requires participation not in the sense of following an existing text but in the sense of creating out of the multiple layers of subtext the kind of meaning which makes most sense for the spectator.

From Modern to Postmodern Organisational Consulting

Organizational theory and practice evolved from classical, to modern and onward to postmodern organizational theory and consulting. Similar developments also happened in Western Europe but not to the same extent as documented in the USA. Hence, the paper focuses mostly on the US-scene concerning both manifestations of postmodernism, namely OOB Theater and OOW organizational consulting.

The classical organizational consulting focused on functional, traditional 'nuts and bolts' methods influenced by Taylor and Fayol and also known as 'Organization & Method' by American companies traded at Wall Street before World War II started in the early twenties and lasting into late forties.

The modern organizational consulting, or OFF-Wall Street Consulting, meaning Off-O&M functional consulting consists of two phases, a first one identified with the emerging '*Human Relations*' school starting in the forties and extending into the fifties e.g. Argyris, Herzberg and Maslow and a second phase belonging to the emerging *large system theory* e.g. represented by Katz & Kahn and Lawrence & Lorsch beginning in the sixties and ending with the eighties represented,.

The postmodern phase, or Off-Off-Wall Street Consulting characterized complexity theory, deconstruction method and network theory represented e.g. by Stacey, Rasmussen and Foucault emerged in the eighties and has taken an increasingly influential role in the organization science field.

The gradual transformation form modern to postmodern organizational theory and consulting

Around the mid-end sixties, the 'avantguard' of organizational consulting moved from a more humanistic orientation called the 'Human Relations' school (e.g. T-Groups), to a systems focus (e.g. socio-technical approach) which then further evolved into large system theory (e.g. search conferences) only to be further eclipsed by complexity and chaos theory (e.g. networking/virtual reality management).

Similar to OB Theater, the impetus for change from OW to OOW consulting originated mostly in the USA where 'modernist' human relations ideology and Lewinian system thinking got progressively replaced or 'enlarged' by large system thinking and contingent leadership models which in turn are being expanded into systems based on chaos principles. The borderline between modern and postmodern is fluid and difficult to draw. The most helpful distinction is provided by Nevis (1997) who distinguishes between problem solving (modernism) and management of dilemmas (postmodernism), the latter being more like a state of continuous ambiguities which cannot be "solved" by an "expert" due to the complexities at hand which englobe consultant, client and the larger field which is embedding the organization.

The field of organizational consulting has in fact undergone an expansion of its constructs similar to the expansion which happened in the theater field in the mid-sixties when it expanded from modern to postmodern theater. The OOB theater's 'Death of Character' has seen a replica in organizational consulting which could be called 'Death of Leadership' or 'Death of Manager' as traditionally defined by Taylorism or the Human Relations school.

Open systems theory or complexity theory with its accompanying focus on networks and simultaneousness of multiple organizational cultures has for instance resulted in a radical redefinition of conventional management concepts. Leaders are not anymore 'making things happen' instead they are 'factors' among other 'factors' who are all contingent on 1) situations (task complexity, input factors, power alliance, strategic mix etc.) 2) subordinate's maturity, readiness, willingness, competence, skills etc. and 3) their own intrapsychological constructs (values, beliefs, self-representation, cognitive processes etc.).

Along with the above comes a magical-artistic view of the new leader (as distinct from the 'minor manager') whose 'transformational' power is assumed to be able to 'turn companies around' through the use and manipulation of various techniques ranging from restructuring (a form of re-scripting in OOB), to the use of symbolic management (de-construction of old company image and re-coding of a new company identity).

The process of new (postmodern) leadership focuses mostly on the use of communication techniques provided by consultancy companies who act in the roles of souffleur, supportive actor and writer-in-residence. Most consultancy firms basically offer the same well known advice over and over again but each time packaged somewhat differently thereby creating a post-modern effect of repetition, circularity and déjà-vu.

This rather ritualistic effect is quite comparable to some postmodern plays which concentrate on ritualized repetitions leading to a trance like perception of reality by the audience. A similar, if not often involuntary effect, can be observed from the reactions of personnel of large companies who are offered for the nth time the performances of the 'Wizards of OZ' Consultancy Co. and who might respond with a form of postmodern dissociation or distancing device called 'innere Kündigung' in German or 'internal dismissal' in English.

Another reason for the existence of postmodernist realities in today's management practice is the rapid increase and application of information technology. Computerization has certainly made management more 'informed' but at the expense of information overload. The often heard complaints of today's managers are that they have too much information, not enough time to read through it and not enough good quality information to make sense of all the information which is bombarding them daily. A situation which is very much comparable to a postmodern play with its deliberate multi-layered multiplex information overload.

Fragmentation, another postmodern theater phenomena, is being created by the growing technological complexity of contemporary business which is creating a situation whereby the manager/employee is put into a similar role like the OOB spectator who is flooded with a multitude of signs and symbols. Like a captive spectator of an OOB play, he has to make sense out of multiplex and often contradictory (multi-logical or multi-rational) policies and directives (scripts, subscripts) of top management (playwright, director, performer) who creates, oftentimes unwillingly, multiple layers of reality which require manager/employee to wear bi -if not multi- focal lenses (perception, understanding).

Postmodern Consultants and their Audiences (Clients)

During the classical period of management theory (Taylor -up to 1940s), organizational consultants were mostly offering specialized functional expertise be this in the subfields of accountancy, financing, taxation and operations management.

With the advent of the Human Relations school, organizational consultants added a focus on group dynamics and sensitivity training coupled with organization development which often was seen as a form of "organizational therapy".

During the humanistic or person oriented period of consulting, clients expected consultants to be genuine and non-technical, partners who would relate to their clients on a personal level. The term of process consultant was often used indicating a focus on human process. Content specialization or competence in specific management areas were considered of secondary importance.

The best examples of expected OW-consulting role behaviors have for instance been spelled out by G.& R.Lippitt (1978), ranging from reflector, process specialist, fact finder, alternative identifier, collaborator in problem solving, trainer or educator, technical specialist to advocate.

With postmodern consulting (OOW), the role of the consultant has become more complex. Consultants are now expected to be more polyvalent accepting for instance different types of assignments ranging from a 1-2 years full time management job inside the client's company to a more 'traditional' short-term consultancy input.

In general, there is a perception in the consulting field that process consulting is not sufficient anymore. Hence, the 'postmodern' organizational consultant should acquire new competencies in order to be 'more responsive' to the client organization's multiple needs. Susan Albers Mohrman writes for instance in the ODC newsletter, a division of the American Academy of Management (Summer 1992):

"Scholars concerned with the development of organizations can no longer afford to be concerned solely with the process. As we become more comfortable operating in the domain of macro change, our tools must reflect the complexity of the macro system....The field of O.D. may need to start thinking of itself as an integrator of knowledge bases, the design of our organizations , for example, is inextricably linked to economic and financial frameworks, to accounting practices, labor relations laws and practices, and to sociological and political economic realities...

The consequence of Susan Mohrman's proposition is a call for an enlargement of the organizational consultants' repertory of interventionist tools which should now become enlarged and be more multi-functional. Other fields of competence should be added. Hence we now have a form of OOB Theater type inter-modal performance standards of organizational consulting.

In addition to role polyvalence, different consultants or consultancy companies are oftentimes called into companies to provide 'ammunition' for different factions within an organization. Acting in the role of a gladiator, these consultants end up being cast against each other to conduct proxy fights for the different departments' heads who act like lead actors in need of good supporting actors and powerful lines. Hence, organizational consulting sometimes resembles ritualistic pseudo-fights based on the enactment of known scripts simultaneously staged against a background of unlocking sometimes amused - sometimes appalled, employees/spectators.

Adding to this perception of 'staged' intervention is the fact that many managers holding high ranking posts know the consulting already. Many have become 'experts' in the latest developments of organizational consulting. They follow

seminars, some write their own books, others appear on television as practitioner-cum-consultant-cum expert. Sometimes, clients might be more informed of the latest fads and trends of the fields than the consultants they have hired for a job. One can easily get an impression of fractured (consultant-client symbiosis) selves interacting with each other, observing each other.

Hence, a postmodern confusion can emerge about who does what for whom. This confusion of roles, scripts and responsibilities is further aggravated by the fact that the ownership composition of many American and British firms has shifted. Shares which used to be in the hands of individuals are now predominantly held by anonymous institutional share holders (Economist, 30 May 1992). Hence, to all the above, we should add the term "Death of Ownership" of public companies, at least in the USA and UK. Fuzzy personal ownership creates more space for the main corporate actors, the top managers, who, in theater language, can more easily change the books (texts) and orchestrate personal compensation packages which seem to have become as boundaryless as a good postmodern play.

The confusion of roles, perspectives, theories etc. are best captured by Tom Peters who stated (1992):

..."If you don't feel crazy, you're not in touch with the times ! The point is vital. These are nutty times. Nutty organizations, nutty people, capable of dealing with the fast, fleeting, fickle, are a requisite for survival."

From Modernism to Postmodernism to ??

The objective of this paper was to shed light on the perceived correspondences between two postmodern phenomena, namely Off-Off-Broadway Theater and Off-Off Wall Street Consulting.

The main comparisons (see figure III) suggest some parallelism between both fields of social activity. Both fields are experiencing a fragmentation of previous norms and a concurrent overlap of different styles, techniques, contents which at times are integrated into a new syncretic whole or at other times remain apart or loosely connected.

The main challenge for performers/consultants and their respective audiences (spectator/client) is the upkeep of a multi- or polyfocal mind which allows for continuous shifting from one level of discourse to the next and which helps avoid the ever present pulling down to a sort of simple black and white dichotomy, more common in previous stages of OB Theater and OW Consulting.

Assuming that the correspondence postulated and described above does indicate a general tendency of the industrialized societies towards postmodernism, then the question needs to be raised "what comes next?" Where will postmodernism lead us ? Will we shift to a new paradigm of ever more complex systems and loose boundaries or will this be a transition towards a more 'primitive' or simply less sophisticated level of functioning?

A society where play and non-play (work, private life) overlap and converge as is the case in today's postmodern society could move towards a stabilized fusion of the new practices or to lead to a subsequent implosion whereby a previous developmental stage of less complex societal functioning might replace the overextended boundaryless structure.

Should the first scenario come through, then one might expect the emergence of a polycentric reality of multiple facets of reality as for instance in politics (death of

superpowers), in economics (death of north-south divide), in psychology (death of individual identity), in sociology (death of citizenship), in anthropology (death of anthropocentrism), in philosophy (death of Judeo-Christian metaphysics), and in religion (death of dogmatism).

Maybe postmodernism can indeed be solidified and conventional 'modern' theory be overcome as suggested by K. Gergen (1990) who writes:

...emphasis moves from "things in themselves" (that is, what there is to be known) to perspectives that determine what we take to be the case. The shift is from the object to be known to the primacy of perspective in guiding human activity and the problematics of valorizing any single perspective over another....

In the field of organizational theory, Morgan (1986) and Bolan & Deal (1984) discuss the postmodern theme and propose to remove organizational theory from "hypothetical-deductive evaluation" and ask the reader to view such theories as "metaphorical images" and "reality-producing perspectives"....

Postmodernism could indeed herald a new world where old and new, past and present, process and content practices could exist simultaneously. But the danger remains of a sudden reversal back towards simpler/less expansive/ tighter boundaries. Similar reversals have existed in the past. In the theater, we have seen e.g. the symbolist fin-de-siècle period (Maeterlinck, Blok, Hofmannstahl, Mayakovsky) which preceded the First World War be eclipsed by the expressionist drôle-de-guerre period (Troller, Witkiewicz, Takl).

Symbolists considered the theater stage to be a representation of inner psychological states and not of outer reality. They made skillful use of sculptural and gestural dramaturgical techniques and also propagated a synthesis of the arts. Their aim was to explore metaphysical realms like the postmodernists of today who search for altered levels of consciousness which Higgins would call "post-SELF cognitivism, new Structuralism and New Positivism".

Other historical similarities exist between fin-de-siècle symbolism and today's postmodernism. Similar to postmodernism's search for cognitive Gestalten or Tableaux, Schnitzler's circular play titled "Der Reigen (La Ronde)" for instance, creates on stage the interchangeable patterns of sexual attraction, fusion and disengagement. Like social archetypes, in a timeless fashion, men and women of all social class backgrounds meet, have intercourse and depart leaving an impression of timelessness, a form of 'thingness' in social interaction turning characters into mere puppets reciting pre-coded scripts like a typical postmodern ahistorical performance.

Looking at the last 100 years of our history, certain shifts in culture cycle could be postulated as e.g. from Symbolism to Expressionism, Humanism on to Postmodernism with all their economic, social, philosophical corollaries.

Similarities between pre-WW-I Symbolism and today's post-modernism appear strong. Are the two culture cycles the same thing in different forms and manifestations? If so, are we about to enter a new culture cycle phase moving from symbolist postmodernism to a new form of expressionism or are the postulated linkage between culture cycles presented below non-sensical?

Even if this repetition were true, the next culture cycle might be ontologically quite different from the Pre-WW-I symbolism but who knows ?

Some scholars and practitioners seem to call for more "concreteness". Reflecting on Postmodern trends in theatre, James Leverett (1991), in his article "Who is there?", writes:

"Today, we must constantly assert theater's THERE-NESS- ,the fact that its participants are alive in the here and now, in order to shield our art against the marauding simulations of electronics. Film isn't 'THERE', television certainly isn't, and as technology continues to find ways to assert reality without first having to record it, what moves before us on the screen is more and more of less and less-a digital manipulation of absences".

Reacting against the danger of 'tribalistic' multi-culturalism and its possible fragmenting influence on the American theater scene, Robert Brustein in "A House on Fire" writes:

"Total absorption in a separate culture, like the adoption of separate tables, separate houses, separate clubs, separate studies and separate schools represents not multi-culturalism but the return of segregation in voluntary form, the abandonment of hope for a national identity, the death of pluralism, the rejection of the great ideal of integration"...(separatist multi-culturalism) spells ethnocentric anarchy, tribal divisions, Balkanized enclaves"...

Multi-culturalism is difficult to achieve in the first place and even more difficult to practice especially in times of ethnic strife, economic recession and political turmoil as e.g. witnessed by the burnout syndrome of Red-Cross workers who have been exposed to intense inner conflicts when faced with contradictions between their own belief system and the cruel realities of violent ethnic conflicts.

Clearly, the current fragmentation and anomie of American and European societies is worrying many, one of them being Peter Drucker (1991), who has been quoted as having said:

"I must say that I see things in this country today (USA) that frighten me terribly. I am talking about a divisiveness and self-centeredness I am not sure we have seen before. I have come to the conclusion that good times are not good for the human race. I am serious about this".

Are we indeed moving towards the limits of what postmodern society can bear be this in theater, politics or societies at large ? Bruce West, a physicist at the University of California and Ary Goldberger, professor at the Harvard Medical School stated in an article in the American Science that:

"Most biological systems, and many physical ones, are discontinuous non-homogeneous, and irregular. The variable, complicated structure, and behavior of living systems seem as likely to be verging on chaos as converging on some regular pattern".

To this, John Briggs (1989) adds the question:

"Chaos, irregularity, unpredictability. Could it be that such things are not mere noise but have laws of their own ?"

One answer to this question could be taken from the past, namely from Huysmans who in 1891 proposed the following insight:

"It is precisely at the moment when positivism is at its heights that mysticism awakens and the follies of the occult begin. - But it has always been like that; tail ends of centuries are all alike. They are periods of uncertainty and confusion. When materialism rages, then magic begins to thrive. This phenomenon reappears every hundred years".

History of course never repeats itself fully. Nevertheless, one could look for patterns of similar or alike situations in the past and compare them with the present. The author has attempted such a historical comparison of today's postmodernism with a historical period, in particular the decadence period of Vienna and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Saner, 1989).

The fin-de-siècle period of Vienna does offer some stunning similarities with contemporary postmodernism. The Viennese 'avantguard' in Economics, Psychology and the Arts showed some 'postmodernist' features. The Austrian Economists school centered around Karl Menger who could be described as being conceptual and cognitive. H. Landreth, David Colander, (1989), describe some of the trends of the Austrian school as follows:

"economic analysis is a process, not a static interaction of individuals, and that time is an essential consideration...Many Austrian economists formerly objected to empirically proved economic theorems. Following von Mises's "praxology", their task was to deductively derive conclusions from the logic of human action".

The emphasis hence was on analysis of thinking, logic of human behavior, flow of time, and not on empirical 'factual' reasoning. The motives of economic behavior were results of 'hidden' human thinking which in postmodern terminology would be called "coded data in need of decoding" only needs to be de-coded. The Austrian schools focus on patterns of economic behavior based on cognitive processes in a non-static context also shows similarities to today's rational expectation theory in macroeconomics with its emphasis on the psychology of consumer buying behaviors in contrast to the more static neo-classical models of macroeconomics.

Concurrently to Menger, another 'structuralist-cognitive' school flourished in Vienna, namely Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis which 'deconstructed' the human personality into Superego, Ego and Id and which initiated the practice of 'hallucinating on the couch', a process which most OOB performers deliberately try to induce in the spectators who are meant to project meaning onto the stage.

In the arts, multi-media events called "happenings" in today's terminology flourished already in Vienna. Kokoschka's performances were mixtures of theater and art. Many of Vienna's artists tried to be 'polyvalent', e.g. Schoenberg was a painter/musician and Schnitzler a medical doctor/playwright. This was also the times of "boundaryless" cross-fertilization between medicine, psychology, sociology and theater, for instance by J. Moreno, the initiator of psychodrama, sociodrama and contributor to sociometry and role playing.

Exploring of possible correspondences between pre-WW-I symbolism and today's postmodernism, the author produced a radio feature consisting, among other parts excerpts of Schnitzler's "Lieutenant Gustl", the first recorded 'Stream of Consciousness' writing in German literature, which is an often used post-modern theater technique. The radio feature ended with a discussion periods by experts of the possible similarities between the two periods. Both periods for instance highlight

1) absorption with individual experience (sense of self, intrapsychic processes, cognition and perception, self image etc.) 2) fascination with boundary spanning (inter-media art and polyvalent roles, and 3) fascination with death and alternate states of consciousness.

Today as then, the focus is on leadership, styles, transformational magic, dreams and fantasies, creativity, genius, stars, empowerment, novelty, uniqueness, polyvalent skills, boundary spanning competencies, mobility. Should these similarities indicate repetition of a previous culture cycle, then one has to ask oneself: Will explosion follow the implosion of individual consciousness as was the case in Austria-Hungary?

The outcome of the discussion on the radio show was inconclusive. Some participants thought they see repetitions others considered the two periods as distinctly different with little similarities.

However, recent developments in the Middle East, Central Asia, Andean countries of Latin America seem to indicate the opposite, namely the beginning of a break up of the established order and a return to expressionist (new figurative-expressionist art) and concomitant primitivism characterized by religious fundamentalism (Christian, muslim, hindu) nationalism, fascism and dispersed armed conflicts and terrorist attacks. The coming years will clarify if these trends continue and possibly extends to the USA and Western Europe or whether the current developments are only transitory and post-modernism will remain after all and become the 'Zeitgeist' of in the next century.

FOOTNOTES

(1) For many theater practitioners, the meaning of OOB theater is strongly attached to the union rules under which a theater production is organized. The OOB productions all have in common either a relaxation of the requirements of Actor's Equity in exchange for the scheduling of a limited number of performances in a house that cannot exceed 199 (or however many) seats (the producers must have their profit limited if they are going to pay the actors less than scale); or the OOB show may actually be non-Equity and thereby escape these rules altogether. For this reason, many actors of the postmodern OOB theater scene retained and guarded their non-Equity status while others were forced to join since they by now perform at many different settings. (The author wishes to express his thanks and appreciation for above clarification to Elinor Fuchs).

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