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Cars in Theatre, Theatre in Cars.
A Case Study: *Mobile Thriller*
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Abstract – This essay aims to provide insights into the relationship between theatre and the automobile through the lens of Mobility Studies and Performance Studies. While cars are commonly featured in visual media, they are rarely seen in theatre due to the inherent limitations of theatrical space. However, some artists have recently embraced this challenge, offering creative solutions both on stage and on the road in site-specific performances. *Mobile Thriller*, a monologue set in a car traveling on the Milan ring road, was initially performed in traditional theatre venues in Milan and Glasgow. It was later adapted for a performance inside a real car at the 2004 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. This essay discusses the differences between two versions of the play, highlighting how theatrical dramaturgy is always structured around the concept of space.

Keywords – Mobility Studies; Site-specific Performance; Edinburgh Fringe Festival; Theatre and Means of Transportation; Space and Dramaturgy

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Cars in Theatre, Theatre in Cars. A Case Study: *Mobile Thriller*

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1. A Mobility Play

While I'm heading wrapped in my comfy German car towards the northeast outskirts of the city, I'm inventing these words for you. It's as if I'd written a long letter that never got finished or was quickly entrusted to an answering machine that nobody listens to. So you can see why I have to keep my mobile switched on, my brand new mobile fully equipped with hands-free. This is a professional and human must for me. In the absence of all else I'm ready to answer the phone and even happy to do so, occasionally. (Gabrielli 43)

This is the beginning of my short one-man play *Qualcosa trilla*, written and performed in Milan in 2001; translated into English as *Mobile Thriller* by Margaret Rose and performed in the United Kingdom and Canada in 2004 and 2005. The protagonist is a wealthy Milanese businessman.

At around forty, he appears to have achieved everything; a well-paid job and a successful career, the latest gadgetry and trappings of modern life, a superb car and a luxury home, a wife and a child. Instead, he is desperate, eaten up with self-loathing, and has decided to end his life. The play re-enacts his last car journey through Milan and out into the suburbs, where Vincenzi, a hired killer, is waiting to shoot him. He talks on his mobile to his wife, child, killer, and his best friend Carlo. On occasions, he speaks into a dictaphone, recording a message he intends to leave for an unnamed woman, a real life, or more probably, an imaginary lover, whom he is passionate about. He seamlessly switches from one addressee to another and back again, in a deeply fragmented monologue, as if zapping between television channels. Linguistically, then, the play reflects the fragmentation in our daily lives, both psychologically and linguistically speaking, caused by mobile phones and remote controls. (Rose and Marinetti 142)

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, an accelerated globalization process brought about a new focus in social sciences and humanities research known as Mobility Studies. Connections, both physical and virtual, had never seemed so easy, fast – and alienating. The widespread use of the Internet and mobile phones forever changed our perception of proximity and distance in relationships. Middle-class professional nomadism, international tourism, and mass migrations redefined our experience of geography. This “mobility turn” introduced a new way of thinking about space, not only in the social sciences but also in the arts and humanities.

Kofi Annan, addressing the United Nations in 2006 about the experience of migrants, suggested that we are living in a ‘new era of mobility’, one that creates both opportunities and challenges. Questions of mobility – and, crucially, of its relationship to various forms of immobility – are currently being urgently addressed across a number of academic disciplines, as well as in the media and in political debate. According to many commentators, the social sciences are experiencing a ‘mobility turn’ [...]; indeed, the cross-disciplinary journal *Mobilities* was launched in

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Lancaster in 2006 precisely to gather and develop the growing scholarship in this field. [...] Mobility theorists do not simply focus on those aspects of life that can be easily designated as mobile; rather, their analysis presupposes that social life consists of movements and stillnesses at different levels that sustain one another. (Wilkie 3)

Qualcosa trilla / Mobile Thriller, by weaving together a car journey, several mobile phone calls, and an erratic stream of consciousness, epitomizes the zeitgeist of the Noughties. Its protagonist remains seated in a car from beginning to end, yet his car moves through a desolate urban landscape. His voice is heard elsewhere in the city through a mobile phone, and his thoughts oscillate between the past and the future, from grim reality to hallucinatory fantasies. When I finished the first draft of this monologue, I had no idea of the numerous ways it would be staged, each exploring its complex spatial potential. I rewrote the play multiple times, adjusting its plot and language to suit different settings. Analyzing this process reveals that theatrical dramaturgy is always structured around the concept of space, directly influencing the rhythm of action and speech.

2. Space and Dramaturgy

Despite all the changes throughout its history, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, theatre writing retains certain unique and distinctive characteristics. The rhythm of a theatrical text exists at the intersection of limited, irreversible time and the three-dimensional space in which the action is imagined. Time is irreversible because there is no possibility of rereading or pausing (as with a book) or rewinding or fast-forwarding (as with an audiovisual product). The space, implied or described by appropriate stage directions, accommodates both actors and spectators. As playwrights, we must always keep this in mind. We write for voices and bodies in motion. That has never changed. What has evolved throughout history is the concept of theatrical space.

A dramatic shift took place in the first half of the twentieth century, as highlighted by the English playwright and scholar Steve Waters: "Theatre in the twentieth century found its conception of space transformed by the challenge of the dynamic geography of cinema; the stage's increasing inertia is a response to the hyperactive motion picture" (57). Before the advent of the new cinematic language, dramaturgical skill involved concentrating the action within confined spaces and times, relying on dialogue to evoke or narrate events happening off-stage. However, in twentieth-century theatre, temporal fragmentation, flashbacks, flash-forwards, and the multiplication of represented spaces emerged. Concurrently, the impossibility of competing with the realism of audiovisual reproduction led most stage designers to move away from naturalism and appeal to the audience's imagination. Starting in the Sixties, theatre also began to venture outside the traditional closed venues designed for it.

The great achievement of the twentieth century is that there is a real dramaturgy of space: theatre people no longer believe in the neutrality of space concerning artistic creation, and they want to create their own space operationally, in the knowledge that the space of the performance and the inseparable space of the theatre are a sense of theatre. Indeed, the place cannot but exert an important influence on the spectator's expectations: the frame is the first source of meaning, and the place and the circumstances in which a theatrical event takes place determine a pre-understanding of it, inevitably bringing with it a cultural convention. To stage a performance in a factory, perhaps occupied, rather than in the hall of a prestigious city theatre, or a church rather than in the kitchen of a private home, inevitably places the spectacular text in a context that would change its understanding, even if it were, at most, the same acting performance. Many artists have consciously worked on this aspect in recent years. (Peja 70-1)

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However, it was not until the turn of the Nineties that a new genre of performance, site-specific theatre, began to be defined. This is how the theorist of postdramatic theatre, Hans-Thies Lehmann, describes it:

Outside the conventional theatre space there are possibilities described as *site-specific theatre*, a term originally used in visual arts. Theatre here seeks out architecture or other location (in the early works of the company Hollandia it was the flat land) – not so much, as the term “site-specific” might suggest, because the site corresponds well to a certain text but because it is made to speak and is cast in a new light through theatre. When a factory floor, an electric power station, or a junkyard is being performed in, a new aesthetic gaze is cast onto them. The space presents itself. It becomes a co-player without having a definite significance. It is not dressed up but made visible. The spectators, too, however, are co-players in such a situation. What is namely staged through site-specific theatre is also a level of commonality between performers and spectators. All of them are guests of the same place: they are all strangers in the world of a factory, an electric power station, or an assembly hangar. Similarly, as in visual arts, and above all in Performance Art, we often find works whose motor is the activation of public spaces. This can take on very different forms. (152)

The boundaries of this new genre are blurred and open to debate. Merely staging a performance outside a traditional theatre does not make it site-specific. Whether based on text or image and action dramaturgy, highly programmed or improvised, interactive or not, the performance should be inherently connected to the chosen space. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, some notable artists and collectives began exploring urban spaces through “mobile” or “nomadic” performances, often using audio devices for playful and critical guided city tours. In 2000, the German performance collective Rimini Protokoll presented *Kanal Kirchner*, where spectators, equipped with a Walkman, traversed Berlin by following instructions on an audiotape. This was the first in a long series of urban explorations, from *Remote X* (2013) to *Utopolis* (2019), with dramaturgical formats adapted to various social and political contexts. For example, in *Remote Milano*, performed in Milan in Autumn 2014, a group of fifty people wearing headphones were guided by a synthetic voice through iconic and lesser-known sites of the city, starting from Cimitero Monumentale. This 90-minute walk altered the spectators' perception of the city, compelling them to experiment on themselves and highlighting paradoxes and contradictions between individual, group, and algorithmic decisions.

Besides Rimini Protokoll, many major theatre companies and performance artists around the world have focused on the act of walking. “The journey through the city proposes a structure that is deliberately open to the invasions of the everyday. Still, more so than in the site-specific theatre pieces, this engagement with space seems to force open the dramaturgy of the work, making the audience aware of their own (literal) progress through the performances. Again, we see a dramaturgy of process – one that deliberately forces itself into a live engagement with space and audience, rather than predict and dominate that encounter” (Turner and Behrndt 197).

There are also examples of performances on trains, cars, boats, and airplanes. Rimini Protokoll in *Cargo X* (2006) transformed a truck into a theatre. The seating installed in the trailer takes fifty spectators on a journey to the places of transit and trade at the city's edges, while two truck drivers tell their stories. An early experiment of site-specific theatre involving trains and railway stations is *America* (1992), Giorgio Barberio Corsetti's adaptation of Franz Kafka's unfinished novel. After its debut in Cividale del Friuli, the show was presented in Milan, inviting spectators to accompany the protagonist's metaphorical journey from the city centre to a desolate suburb. Thus the Cadorna train station became the port of New York and the train on which the spectators boarded the ocean liner on which Karl Rossmann embarked. According to the director and dramaturg, interviewed by Renata Molinari, the discrepancy between the evoked and real places serves to create a sense of estrangement:

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Here in Milan, the route constantly questions the relationship with very concrete, even everyday situations. The railway, the commuter train: the place of thought one has when moving from work to home and back. There is a characteristic of emptiness, of silence, even in such a definitive journey. This everyday concreteness is filled with characters, with ghosts that suddenly appear, or with urban industrial landscapes, now abandoned, but full of meaning linked to work, production, and survival. This alone creates a very interesting shift. Then there is the disconnect between text and concrete presences perceived in their everyday function. When the actor-character says: 'I didn't realize it, but this ship is very big', and he does so by looking out of the train window, this already creates a disconnect. The audience immediately accepts this, but at the same time enters a dimension in which the words name things that are different from what is in front of you, or different from the text. (Kafka 41-2)

In her review of performance experiments involving disparate kinds of means of transport, Fiona Wilkie mentions *Five-Second Theatre* (2005), a series of performances curated by Anna Pharoah, in which a kitchen window is adapted into an exhibition space, situated on the side of a house, visible to train passengers travelling into and out of Hull station.

More specifically, the kitchen window is announced as a *theatre* space (the sign reads simply 'The Five-Seconds Theatre', and stylistically recalls notices of popular entertainment such as fair-ground or circus). Though the first set of works shown in the window above this sign were video projections originally made for other contexts, the later offerings constituted a more ambitious theatrical agenda. In *Spaghetti*, for example, the kitchen window reveals a couple eating an excessive meal, with wine glasses balanced precariously and sauce-laden spaghetti overflowing onto the window ledge. The event references the kind of private scene that might be viewed from a passing train but is self-consciously displayed as over-abundant, uncontrollable by the domestic space. In apparently reinforcing the position of the train passengers as voyeurs, this example in fact begins to problematize that role. (58-9)

3. Cars in Literature and Theatre

The automobile, an object symbol of the technological and social transformations of the twentieth century, even in its post-modern evolution, cannot but be at the centre of Mobility Studies, in an interdisciplinary effort that links the social sciences with the humanities. "Contributions from cultural studies, feminism, geography, migration studies, politics, science studies, sociology, transport and tourism studies, and so on are hesitatingly transforming social science and especially invigorating the connections, overlaps, and borrowings with both physical science and with literary and historical studies. The mobility turn is post-disciplinary" (Urry 6).

In the field of literary studies, and specifically in Italy, Emanuele Zinato's seminal essay *Automobili di carta* (2012) stands out. It investigates the relationship between 20th-century literature and automotive objects and spaces. Zinato explores major Western literatures, analyzing the representation of cars in texts. His study spans from the uncritical exaltation by the Futurists to the apocalyptic postmodern visions of James G. Ballard, and includes works by authors such as Gabriele D'Annunzio, Guillaume Apollinaire, Massimo Bontempelli, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Luigi Pirandello, Robert Musil, Antonio Gramsci, Simone Weil, Aldous Huxley, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, Vladimir Nabokov, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Franco Fortini, Vittorio Sereni, Luciano Bianciardi, Italo Calvino, Primo Levi, Paolo Volponi, Dino Buzzati, W. H. Auden, and Pier Vittorio Tondelli. Zinato's overview concludes with two significant examples from young Italian fiction at the turn of the late Eighties and the first half of the Nineties. Both the short story *Grande Raccordo* by Marco Lodoli (1989) and the novel *Il dipendente* by Sebastiano Nata (1995) are narrated in

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the first person by protagonists who traverse hypermodern spaces wrapped in the protective shell of their cars. *Grande Raccordo* features a teacher who, driving daily along a stretch of Rome's Raccordo Anulare on his way to a school outside the city, observes with both tenderness and horror the signs of life in the suburbs. *Il dipendente* follows a multinational company manager who sells credit cards, is ambitious and emotionally unstable, constantly on the move, and immersed in the competitive vortex of the post-Fordist economy.

The protective shell of the car allows the protagonist to imagine himself as an unscrupulous hyper-urban flâneur. Michele loiters in his Audi at night around Rome in search of prostitutes, amidst flashes of memory and attacks of anxiety. [...] In the end, however, he cannot withstand the ruthless competition and is ousted from the company. [...] Deprived of identity, he lives his last hours of molecular existence: he drives off towards Milan on a night of pouring rain, smokes a Tuscan and drinks a bottle of Johnny Walker, runs into a traffic jam on the motorway, tries to overtake a lorry but a huge truck arrives on the other side. [...] The postmodern illusions of competitive omnipotence and the graceful, forgetful incorporeality of the electronic species have their allegorical denial in this fatal accident, a veritable parable on the limits of the *magnificent* corporate *fates*. (Zinato 101-2)

The intensive use of the interior monologue and stream of consciousness in Nata's novel helps to highlight a peculiar characteristic of late twentieth-century car drivers' psychological condition: isolation from the surrounding reality, accompanied by voyeurism and a tendency to daydream. This isolation, which is often somewhat pathological, became even more pronounced in the early Noughties with the increasing technological integration of automobiles and the virtual sphere. From a sociological perspective, John Urry emphasizes the negative effects of this phenomenon.

Car drivers, while moving at speed, lose the ability to perceive local detail beyond the car, let alone to talk to strangers, to learn local ways of life, to sense each place. Sights, sounds, tastes, temperatures and smells get reduced to the two-dimensional view through the car windscreen and through the rear mirror, the sensing of the world through the screen being the dominant mode of dwelling in the contemporary world. What lies beyond that windscreen is an affective other, kept at bay through privatizing technologies incorporated within cars. These technologies in theory ensure a consistent supply of information, a relatively protected environment, high quality sounds and increasingly sophisticated systems of monitoring. They enable the hybrid of the car-driver to negotiate conditions of intense riskiness on high-speed roads (roads are increasingly risky because of the reduced road-space now available to each car). And as cars have increasingly overwhelmed almost all environments, so everyone experiences such environments through the protective screen and increasingly abandons streets and squares to omnipotent metallic iron cages. (129-30)

A much more optimistic view is taken by Scottish Literature scholar Lynne Pearce, who in her book *Drivetime* analyzes a rich archive of twentieth-century British and American texts, exploring the analogies between mind journeys and car journeys: "[...] The car's movement through the physical (and spatial) landscape is often strikingly evocative of the mind's journey through the figurative (and temporal) landscape of internal consciousness. In other words, even as the view from the car window may be likened to the thoughts that 'flash' through a subject's mind, minute by minute, so too does the driver's ability to reverse, detour and generally explore the road network appear to simulate the journeys of our minds into the past or, through projection, into the future" (6). By retracing the driving events in the literary texts of the authors she cites - from Virginia Woolf to Joan Didion, from Jack Kerouac to Neil Young - Pearce demonstrates that the automobile, besides being the means of locomotion that has most characterized and conditioned post-modern individualism, can prove to be a formidable

dream-machine: “Apart from providing drivers and passengers with a space both spatially and temporally ‘closed off’ from the distractions and demands of everyday life, the forward motion of the car [...] typically propels our thoughts towards resolution, be this in the form of a personal and/or worldly ‘utopia’ or a transcendental expression of the death drive” (197).

4. From *Qualcosa trilla* to *Mobile Thriller*

My play *Mobile Thriller*, an inner monologue with a stream of consciousness, which coincides, in real-time, with a driving event, thus reconnects with an illustrious literary tradition; but it constitutes an eccentric example in the theatrical field, and I propose it as a case study for its evolution from a traditional dramaturgical form to site-specific writing. The original Italian text, *Qualcosa trilla*, staged in 2001, evoked a car journey through the suburbs of Milan, but no cars appeared on stage, nor did the suburbs of Milan. There was nothing on stage except an actor, alone, in a beam of light, with a mobile phone. But in 2004, at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, director Carrie Cracknell proposed to set the play in a real car, driving through the suburbs of the Scottish capital, with a maximum of three spectators sitting in the back of the car. The transformation from a traditional play to a score for a site-specific event required a radical rewrite. Working with translator Maggie Rose, director Carrie Cracknell, and producer James Erskine, I made the following changes:

- I broke up the rhythm of the text by dividing it into sections corresponding to parts of the journey. *Qualcosa trilla* consisted of a flow of words about twenty minutes long; *Mobile Thriller*'s car journey would take about an hour. After studying the car's route, I placed pauses (of varying duration and linked to traffic conditions) at the most appropriate points. The text of the sections was rearranged so that each fragment finished in suspense, creating unresolved expectations.

- We had to include a non-speaking character (the chauffeur) for safety reasons. The main actor could not act while driving, it would have been dangerous. The interactions between the protagonist and the chauffeur, although reduced to the essentials, had an important function of rhythmic scansion.

- The Milan narrated in the first version of the text became Edinburgh, with precise and punctual references to the landscape seen from the window. It was, therefore, necessary to insert these references into the text sections, synchronizing them with the movement of the car. We created a kind of storyboard on the map of the city.

- We created a small stock of lines that the protagonist could use, with a certain degree of improvisation, in case of unforeseen events such as traffic jams, car accidents, etc.

- We adapted the language to the local culture, increasing the degree of realistic credibility. The Milanese jokes of Carlo, the protagonist's best friend, were rewritten by an Edinburgh stand-up comedian.

- I had to cut some of the lyrical parts of the text, which were acceptable in the neutral space of a theatre but would have sounded strange inside that BMW.

- The ending, only hinted at in the original text, became an actual action scene. The car arrived at dusk in a desolate dock area in Leith. The protagonist would get out. Another car would come speeding by, creaking. The protagonist would catch up with his killer. The audience in the back seat would hear a gunshot behind them; finally, they would be driven back into the city centre by the chauffeur.

Margaret Rose and Cristina Marinetti conclude:

In Edinburgh, *Mobile Thriller* won a Herald Angel Award and received a string of four and five-star reviews, which doubtless helped it continue its travels. In 2005 it embarked on an intercity tour taking in London (Battersea Arts Center), Warwick, Birmingham, Cambridge, and

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Manchester, and later in the year, Toronto. It then had another successful run at the Edinburgh Fringe, together with another short play, *Broken Road* by Ryan Craig. The changes I have discussed for the Edinburgh run, have happened again and again as Carrie Cracknell and James Erskine have customized *Mobile Thriller* to each specific city. Without these continual adjustments to make the play fit the city, I do not believe it would have held such audience appeal or enjoyed such continuing critical acclaim. (151-2)

5. Theatre Studies on the Road

Having sought further examples of the active use of the car in theatrical performances in Italy, I would like to mention two projects. The first, like *Mobile Thriller*, is text-based. It is the short play *What Are You Afraid of?*, written by the American playwright and screenwriter Richard Dresser in 1999. It features a male character and a female character, developing a complicated love relationship. It was staged in a car with three audience members in the back seat. It started at the Humana Festival and ran in Hamburg Germany for four years before being adapted for the screen by German director Stefan Pucher. The Italian version *Di che hai paura?* premiered at the 2009 'Quartieri dell'arte' festival in Viterbo.

The second example is performance-based and more strictly defined as site-specific. It is the *DRIVE_IN* project by the Milanese group Strasse, which ran for ten editions between 2011 and 2017. One spectator at a time is taken on a journey of about half an hour in a car through a suburban or interstitial urban landscape. The spectator witnesses small performative actions that blend in and blend with everyday life, without the driver giving him or her any means of distinguishing reality from fiction, maintaining strict silence. "The choice of using the car as if it were a camera, without making a video as in the initial stages of the project, but letting the gaze of the spectator/passenger record the images of the places crossed and the actions taking place inside them, creates a strong caesura compared to other contemporary artistic experiences" (Pessina 21).

While recollecting and analyzing, twenty years later, a personal experience of writing 'in movement', this essay attempts to provide insights into the relationship between theatre and the automobile through the lens of Mobility Studies and Performance Studies. Although necessarily incomplete, I hope it will stimulate scholars of narratology and performing arts to explore the subject further.

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