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ZÉNÓ VERNYIK

**“FOURDIMENSIONAL IDEAS INTO
A TWODIMENSIONAL STAGE”: E. E. CUMMINGS’
AND LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY’S AESTHETICS OF DRAMA
AND THEATER**

Abstract

Canonized and respected as it may be, E. E. Cummings’ oeuvre is surely anything but well known: it is far from being general knowledge that his contribution to art and culture well exceed those of a poet. And while some scholars are active in making him more and more respected as a painter, there are few traces of interest in his prose and his dramatic works.

This essay shows that five articles written by Cummings for the magazines *The Dial* and *Vanity Fair* can together be considered as his dramatic program. Furthermore, it provides a comparative analysis of his theories and those that László Moholy-Nagy advertised in his essay “Theater, Circus, Variety”, a part of the 1925 manifesto *The Theater of the Bauhaus*.

Through this analysis of Cummings’ theorizing about theater, this short essay tries to call attention to the fact that in contrast with both present-day thoughts about his importance in the field of drama, as well as criticisms of his own contemporaries, Cummings was actually following the contemporary currents of theater.

Key words

Bauhaus; theater; drama, circus; E. E. Cummings; László Moholy-Nagy

E. E. Cummings published five articles between October 1925 and June 1926 in the magazines *Vanity Fair* and *The Dial* that dealt with or touched upon the topic of the theater and performing arts in general.¹ In the following paper, I prove that these short texts, if put together, give a coherent theatrical program, and that this program is similar and comparable to László Moholy-Nagy’s 1925 theatrical manifesto of the Bauhaus-movement. By bringing into the matrix of the five articles the stage directions of Cummings’ *Him*, his most important and complete play that appeared in 1927, I simultaneously show his ideas in work and provide

a fuller picture of his ideas, as well as prove that his actual plays are in harmony with his “theoretical” texts. The importance of this venture is that it might reveal that regardless of the small number of plays that E. E. Cummings created, he still should be considered as one of the most innovative and radical playwrights of the late 1920s in America.

It is important to stress, however, that the present article in no way attempts to be a literary analysis or critical assessment of the play *Him*, nor is it an attempt at using the approach of a particular school of thought to highlight certain aspects of E. E. Cummings’ text. Instead, what the paper attempts is something reminiscent of a more down-to-earth, traditional philological approach: simply juxtaposing texts of an author in search of a unified conceptual framework. In addition to that, the paper tries to test this picture of a theory on Cummings’ best-known play, *Him*, to see to what extent theory and practice correspond. However, it does not change the focus of the paper in any way: it focuses solely on the theatrical *theory*, and the play is invoked only as a tool in understanding that.

One could ask what makes László Moholy-Nagy’s theatrical manifesto and the *miscellanea* published by Cummings on the theater comparable. One way to answer that question could be by referring the reader to the time frame in which the Bauhaus-movement was active and the time when Cummings wrote his short texts on the theater and his plays. Another way could be to stress the general influence of European avant-garde theater on modern experiments in America. In a similar vein, one could emphasize the numerous references Cummings himself makes to contemporary European and Russian experimental projects. However, there is much more support in the texts themselves, as will be seen below.

László Moholy-Nagy in his text on Total Theater claims that the said theater should apply as many kinds of simultaneous sharp contrasts as possible, (e.g. comic-tragic, grotesque-serious, minute-monumental, etc.). Furthermore, he states that the best efforts in doing this were provided by circus, operetta, vaudeville, burlesque and American clown-jokes (Moholy-Nagy 1961: 64). It is quite easy to see how close such a statement is to E. E. Cummings’ opinion about the theater, who continuously criticized all attempts in the field of performing arts which were carried out in conformance with conservative assumptions about performances. What is more, just as Moholy-Nagy seeks for sharp contrast, for the simultaneous and complementary presence of opposites, Cummings also seeks for *coincidentia oppositorum* when he says that “the graphic arts and the theatre have an analogous limitation – that is, a thing or character cannot possibly be presented as beautiful, noble, or desirable and also as ugly, ignoble and despicable,” while, at the same time, “in burlesk [sic], we meet with an echo of the original phenomenon: ‘opposites’ occur *together*” (Cummings 1965e: 126–7).

Moholy-Nagy also propagates a large-scale, dynamical and rhythmical creative process that operates with the largest possible set of contrasting devices in an elementarily compact way (Moholy-Nagy 1961: 64), but he does not provide us with much data as for what it exactly means for the theater. To put it more simply, he does profess the constant coincidence of opposites and the organizing

principle of all-encompassing unity, but cannot give any concrete notion about the relationship of these two principles. Unlike Cummings who, in contrast, is clear about this relationship: he states that opposites are not natural, but made and “language was not always blest with ‘opposites’” (Cummings 1965e: 127). On the contrary, “what ‘weak’ means and what ‘strong’ means were once upon a time meant *by* one *word*” (127). That is, opposites *belong together*: they are aspects of the same totality. What is more, totality springs from the coincidence of opposites and only from there, since

if the art of common-or-garden painting were like the art of burlesk [sic], we should be able to see – impossibly enough – all the way around a solid tree, instead of merely seeing a little more than half of a tree (thanks to binocular parallax or whatever it is) and imagining the rest. (127)

Of course, it is possible to understand the above dicta in a purely philosophical sense, and without doubt, both of the authors meant to use them this way, as well. However, I propose that when they claimed the necessity of totality and visibility of the whole, when they were pursuing the possibility of seeing from all angles at the same time, they meant it in a more concrete sense, too. That is, they were also seeking the *visual possibility* of seeing around, of getting rid of a fixed, single perspective. Moholy-Nagy emphasizes the importance of eliminating the insulation of stage and auditorium, and making the spectators a part of the spectacle, not as passive receptacles, but as active agents:

There would be a further enrichment if the present isolation of the stage could be eliminated. In today’s theater, STAGE AND SPECTATOR are too much separated, too obviously divided into active and passive, to be able to produce creative relationships and reciprocal tensions.

It is time to produce a kind of stage activity which will no longer permit the masses to be silent spectators, which will not only excite them inwardly but will let them *take hold and participate* – actually allow them to fuse with the action on the stage at the peak of cathartic ecstasy. (Moholy-Nagy 1961: 67–8, original emphasis)

Moholy-Nagy, however, goes even further, and requests the abandonment of the peep-show stage or picture stage and advises the use of floating suspension bridges, rear and frontal tribunes, planes that can be moved horizontally and/or vertically, and the modification of the placement and shape of the stage also (68). In accordance with his ideas, Farkas Molnár designed his U-theater, which is a complex of four scenes. The first of which (A) can be raised and lowered in part or as a whole. The second (B) is capable of the same, plus it can be moved to the front or to the back. The third (C) can be moved back or to the sides, while the fourth (D) is suspended in the air, above scene B. Walter Gropius produced another, differing plan in accordance with the ideas of László Moholy-Nagy. This

one is called Total Theater, and can be moved around to transform into a) a deep scene, b) a proscenium, or c) an arena.

E. E. Cummings also propagates the elimination of the insulation of stage and auditorium, and making the spectators a part of the spectacle. He criticizes “modern theatres, where an audience and a spectacle merely confront each other” (Cummings 1965b: 112) and adores and considers worthy of imitation Coney Island, where “we ourselves perform impossible feats” (Cummings 1965a: 150) and where “THE AUDIENCE IS THE PERFORMANCE, and vice versa” (151). He also has his concrete plans of arrangement of theaters. First and foremost, he states the superiority of the arena arrangement: “a gigantic spectacle; *which is surrounded by an audience*, – in contrast to our modern theatres, where an audience and a spectacle merely confront each other” (Cummings 1965b: 112).

However, he does not stop here. In his play, *Him*, he devised some methods through which a traditional, peep-show arrangement can be made more flexible and involving. The first arrangement (Figure 1) attempts to give the illusion of an arena, or at least is a way to see the spectacle from all the angles, although not at the same time. What he devised was to build the scenery of a room, with four walls, out of which one is invisible and the other three are solid. From time to time, from scene to scene, the wall chosen for invisibility changes (See Cummings 1970: 1.2, 1.4, 3.1, 3.5). And this way, the featured point of view goes around the room: according to the author’s directions, it goes around clockwise – this way, the spectators get the feeling of going round the stage. Therefore, perhaps, at least in this respect, this arrangement is superior to the original arena arrangement – although there, the stage was really in the middle, not just virtually, and there really was no front side, but the spectators had no illusion of moving and every spectator was limited to one and only one set of points of view, designated by his or her seat’s position, just as in the case of the traditional arrangement.

Cummings’ most radical critique of the traditional picture stage was given in his essay which appeared in the May 1926 issue of the *Dial*, entitled “The Theatre: II,” where he cited Friedrich Kiesler:

The peep-show-stage is a box appended to an assembly room. [...] Speech and action cease to be organic, or plastic; they do not grow with the scenery, but are decorative, textual byplay. [...] [T]he back of the stage is useless – excess space, vacuum, embarrassment, an exhibit room for the stage sets. [...] The stage frame, as peephole of the peep-show-stage, is like a *panoramic camera shutter*. The deployment of wings, actors, and objects is perceived *in relief*, not tri-dimensionally. (Cummings 1965d: 146, emphasis added)

Shockingly, he blames traditional theater for an inability to work in three dimensions and considers the picture stage as no more than a mere two-dimensional representation of “real space”. As if an invisible projector would project all that happens onto an invisible screen, “onto the surface of the backdrop” (147). For

him, here, “[s]pace is space only for the person who moves about in it, for the actor, not for the spectator” (147). Thus, he makes us see that traditional theater with its looking-box arrangement of the stage is guilty of, if nothing else, not using to their full capacity all the features which can make theater different from cinema. Or perhaps, rather than different from cinema, what he really considers a problem is that it fails not to be a “slave to the faith in the technical *sightline*” (Virilio 1998: 118), although it has much potential to do so. But traditional theater, as if it was a movie camera as a sighting instrument, reduces the mobility of one’s eyes “to a state of rigid and practically invariable structural immobility” (118). The “Cyclops eye of the lens” (118), or “the compulsory site from which vision can be conceived or represented” (Crary 1998: 245), is adopted and transformed into the Cyclops eye of theater.

Although Cummings continues his text with Kiesler’s idealist conception of a new, so called “space-stage”, I do not consider it relevant for the purposes of my essay, unlike the next of his techniques. This he invented in order to extend the possibilities of a more or less traditionally arranged theater. He devised a “semicircular piece of depth, at whose inmost point nine black stairs lead up to a white curtain” (Cummings 1970: 45). Behind the curtains there is another, smaller stage (47–9) (see Figure 2). And on top of all that, one of the actors is sitting in the third row of the audience and interacts with the actors on stage, at first only verbally, but later he also mounts the stage (50). By installing another stage, what is more, at the back of the original one, Cummings makes the back of the stage also visible and thus available for acting. Or rather more, he shifts the focus of action and attention, the center of movements, continuously between the two stages. Furthermore, by placing this *other* stage at a pedestal-like height, he alienates the spectator even more from the action and from the dramatic universe, and at the same time, ridicules the traditional theatrical arrangement, by putting it on stage and into the focal point. The idea of placing a “fake spectator” in the auditorium is perhaps not the most original idea Cummings has ever had; however, it is quite a good device for making the spectators more a part of the play. At least it makes the space of the auditorium available for action, and increases the spectators’ feeling of being in the play, not just beholding the play, by placing them in a position where action goes on, not in a separated compartment. Their position belongs to the sphere of action this time. Of course, it will not make spectators into participants, even though Cummings does not totally neglect this possibility. By giving a role of authority to the fake spectator, who is intent on stopping / planning to stop the play and arrest the actor for indecency,² he actually leaves a tiny little door open for this purpose. There is a slight chance (although really very minimal) that some of the spectators will accept the fake spectator as a real one, as a real authority, and behave accordingly. His extension of the sphere of actions to the space occupied by the spectators again resonates with the ideas of Moholy-Nagy. As Hans Curjel notes, the “sketch, which illustrates [Moholy-Nagy’s] essay from 1924, registers in four columns the sequence of transformations which occur in synchronized form on three stage platforms and a projection screen” (Curjel 1991: 94). Just as

Cummings' stage on the stage, his division of the action into four different fields, one of which is cinematic projection, Moholy-Nagy also alienates the spectator, as well as calling attention to the processes of the theater themselves, and their very scripted and artificial nature. Furthermore, in his stage direction of *The Tale of Hoffman*, Moholy-Nagy had "young girls [floating] in dreamlike rigid poses on high swings over the heads of the audience" (95), an arrangement he employed for the same purpose as Cummings came up with using the fake spectator: to make the space of the spectators part of the sphere of action.

Cummings' third technique is less radical or even successful than the two previous, however, it is also worth mentioning. This time, in Act II of *Him*, he devises a scene in which the scenery (the deck of an ocean liner) only lets the actors move in a line that forms the letter U with its bottom facing the auditorium (Cummings 1970: 59–60) (see Figure 3). Now there is no actor in the third or any other row, nor spectators sitting between the parallel vertical lines of the U: they remain passive receptacles. However, this U-stage still is an important modification of the original arrangement. It transforms the acting space radically, even though it is still (close to) two-dimensional. As I mentioned before, the picture stage arrangement limits the sphere of action mostly to a left-right/up-down system of coordinates. Even though there exists a front-back axis, it is not used to its full capacity and even if it were, it is not visible because of the backdrop-front configuration of the scenario. By transforming the stage into a U that propagates back-front movements, while limiting all left-right moves to a minimum, Cummings turns the stage by 90°, and creates a front-back configuration (see Figure 4). By this change, the traditional arrangement is ridiculed even further, while the unconventional direction of movements is itself interesting and ironical. The mechanical action of two actors walking to and fro in the opposite direction, meeting halfway asking and answering three clichéd questions only further emphasizes this turning of traditional stage action on its head (see Figure 3 and Cummings 1970: 59–60). Not to mention how much it resembles Moholy-Nagy's intention to achieve the canceling out of "the predominance of the exclusively logical intellectual viewpoint" (Moholy-Nagy 1961: 57) from theater, and to break it free from what he considered as the obtrusive and external influence of a literary text, if it makes the theater little more than "literary-illustrative" (57). This clichéd, mechanical walking back and forth that Cummings applies is an effective practical manifestation of the claim by Moholy-Nagy that in the new theater "the traditionally 'meaningful' and causal interconnections can NOT play the major role" (58). The very repetitiousness of the action in this scene of *Him*, as well as the text uttered, echo Moholy-Nagy's example of the possible techniques to be employed by the future creator of his version of the new theater: "the REPETITION of a thought by many actors, with identical words and with identical or varying intonation and cadence, could be employed as a means of creating synthetic (i.e., unifying) creative theater" (62). Even though repetition is never exact in this scene, but rather advances with minute, but meaningful changes, this fact only further amplifies Moholy-Nagy's concept, rather than lessen its effect:

FIRST CONVERSATION: What’s new? – Nothing.

Business? – Soso.

Happy? – Not yet.

Solong. – Solong.

SECOND CONVERSATION: What’s new? – Nothing.

Married? – Uh-huh.

Children? – I dunno.

Solong. – Solong.

THIRD CONVERSATION: What’s new? – Nothing.

Happy? – Soso.

Retired? – Not yet.

Solong. – Solong. (Cummings 1970: 60)

And the text, as well as the action, goes on in this meaningfully monotonous way, somewhat similarly to what Moholy-Nagy achieved in his sets for Paul Hindemith’s *Hin und Zurück*. Moholy came up with the design of a “mechanical dove [that] fluttered across the stage as a prologue, and returned as an optical [that is, projected] epilogue” (Curjel 1991: 95).

The fourth arrangement is but a modified version of the second. However, these modifications are important enough to deal with them here. The stage is a “semicircular piece of depth” again (Cummings 1970: 125), this time the circumference of which “is punctuated at equal intervals by nine similar platforms. The fifth platform [...] supports a diminutive room or booth whose front wall is a curtain” (25) (see Figure 5). With all kinds of ridiculous, monster-like creatures sitting on eight out of nine platforms, the setting is, of course, that of a circus: the stage is one half of an arena. By placing almost all the characters of the play in front of the platforms, swarming, creating a mob, there is some possibility of creating the sensation of being inside an arena, although not much of a possibility. However, the act of placing another stage on the stage is there, once again, this time with an added twist. The curtained, three-walled booth is not just any booth, but the home where the scenes of the rotating room occurred. This way, the play refers to itself both textually and pictorially, creating an effect of *mise-en-abyme*.

It is easy to see how these techniques share the aim of finding and creating new and exciting theatrical arrangements. Most of them are common or at least have common roots. The arena and/or its half, plus the technique of the rotating room as a surrogate arena, multiple stages, stages on stages – they are all featured both by Bauhaus architects in their plans for a new kind of theater and by Cummings in his efforts to find new ways of using the old kind of basic structures. And in both cases, what is common in these efforts is that they experiment with space, or rather with sets of spaces and their relationship(s).

However, similarities between the notions of Cummings and those of Moholy-Nagy cannot only be found at macro level – there are other, more specific features that are common to the two efforts. László Moholy-Nagy emphasizes the

importance of limiting the number of devices (actors, props, lighting, etc.) to the minimum required by the artistic effect intended, this way creating a harmonious unity devoid of anything superfluous, pompous or extraneous (Moholy-Nagy 1961: 50). Cummings' idea about theatrical performances is roughly the same, as his play *Him* testifies. Most of its scenes are totally minimalist in respect of props or decorations, some of them do not even have any. Those few that do not conform to this minimalist model, and have grandiose plans about stage decorations and arrangement, are nevertheless, at the same time, also symbolic and serve the purpose of the unity of artistic effect: there are no unnecessary, minute details. For example, the directions for the first scene of act one are the following:

A flat surface on which is painted a *Doctor* anaesthetizing a *Woman*. In this picture there are two holes corresponding to the heads of the physician and of the patient, and through these holes protrude the living heads of a man and a woman.

Facing this picture, with their backs to the audience, three withered female *Figures* are rocking in rocking chairs and knitting. (Cummings 1970: 1)

There is no instruction as to the place, time, environment, weather, etc. that is to be evoked. Just those features are mentioned which are important for an artistic effect; there is no verisimilitude or alternative "reality". As the above already exemplifies, for E. E. Cummings, just as for László Moholy-Nagy, the involvement-rate and experience of the spectator has nothing to do with the relationship between the appearance of the spectacle and any kind of outside "reality". On the contrary, both of them are aiming to make their theater more and more similar to such arts that are concerned with pure illusion and spectacle (circus, vaudeville, amusement parks, etc.).

At the same time, they both want to separate the theatrical performance and transform it into an autonomous entity, independent of all other arts, yet incorporating their achievements. And for both of them the most important task is to get rid of the oppressive influence of literature; for them, the art of the theater is no literature. Moholy-Nagy explicitly speaks about the burden of "literary encumbrance", and criticizes any such intention that is to direct a (solely) literary source as a theatrical performance (Moholy-Nagy 1961: 50). Of course, texts with literary value can have and must have their rule in the Gesamtkunstwerk of theater, but just as parts – they have no priority over *any* other component. And Cummings feels the same: he claims that theater "has a great future behind it, said 'future' being The Circus" (Cummings 1965c: 144), and that in an ideal theater "[n]othing is accessory: everything is a complement, a sequence, a development, a conclusion" (Cummings 1965d: 147), basically "a gigantic spectacle, [...] [where] content and form are aspects of a homogeneous whole" (Cummings 1965b: 112–3). A theatrical performance should no longer be the staging of a text, but an all-encompassing, multi-layered, complex show. That Cummings found the circus to be an ample example is no surprise: circus performances of

the era were “spectacular stage productions [...] [performed] in gigantic spaces for thousands of people” (Malamud 2001: 45), they were of much larger scale than any of the conventional performances of traditional theaters. Instead of the minute stages and often decorous action, circus shows “featured elaborate scenery, hundreds of singers, dancers, and actors in extravagant costume who mimed the drama to orchestral accompaniment”, combining “dance, music, visual spectacle, and mimed action” (47). It is important to stress that these shows were indeed comparable to the theater, as in contrast to our present popular conception of circuses, these performances were narrative in character, organized into one organic whole, rather than multiple, but distinct entertainments (47).

The most characteristic feature of this organic totality, according to E. E. Cummings, is its possession of “the virtue of being intensely alive; whereas the productions of the conventional theatre, like academic sculpture and painting and music, are thoroughly dead” (Cummings 1965e: 129). Basically, “*all genuine theatre is a verb and not a noun*” (Cummings 1965a: 151). It is movement, continuous change and mobility. Again, László Moholy-Nagy has a similar idea of theater, as he praises the attempt of August Stramm to create a theater that was an experiment in sound and movement, propelled by the force of human passion, fueled by action and tempo (Moholy-Nagy 1961: 50). Even though he criticizes the subjectivity that human emotions may bring to the theatrical spectacle, his urging for objectivity, the possibility of the exact engineering of effects does not do away with the human component or with intensity and dynamism (56–8).

The previous paragraphs have dealt only with some of the aspects of the “theatrical program” of E. E. Cummings: spatiality, spectator-involvement, the relationship of the theatrical venture to other art forms, and stage-design. The reason for this was primarily that it is this part of the “theory” of Cummings that is most directly available for a comparison with that of the Bauhaus. However, there are other aspects of his activity in the field of drama that deserve further attention and might serve as the topic of a future paper. To mention but one: it would be fruitful to compare the topics, the themes, the characters and the situations of his plays with those of Theater of the Absurd, as George J. Firmage suggested in a brief remark in his Introduction to the volume containing all of the plays of E. E. Cummings (Firmage 1965: vii). Through such and similar efforts, E. E. Cummings will hopefully one day receive the place that has been unduly denied him as a playwright in the history of modern American drama.

Notes

¹ Namely “The Adult, the Artist and the Circus,” in *Vanity Fair*, October 1925; “You Aren’t Mad, Am I?” in *Vanity Fair*, December 1925; “The Theatre: I,” in *The Dial*, April 1926; “The Theatre: II,” in *The Dial*, May 1926 and “Coney Island,” in *Vanity Fair*, June 1926.

² John Rutter, President of the Society for the Contraception of Vice. See the play for further information (Cummings 1970: 50).

Illustrations

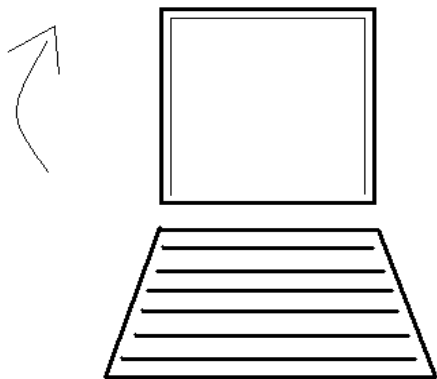


Figure 1 E. E. Cummings' rotating room

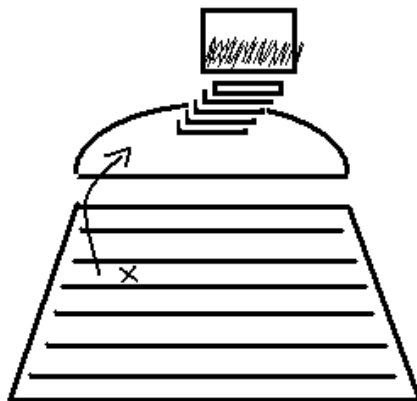


Figure 2 Cummings' second technique

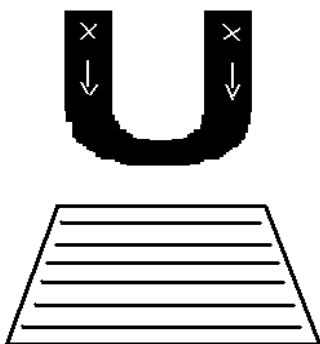


Figure 3 The U-stage

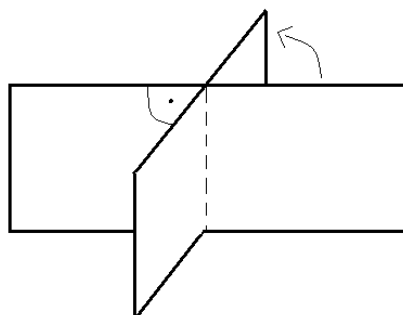


Figure 4 Turning the plane of action

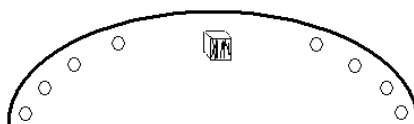


Figure 5 The circus scene

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