

## Venues, Elegant and Otherwise

Large auditoria, full of light, small theatres, secluded in back streets or banished to the suburbs, amateur theatres crammed with worn inventories, serious houses of culture, cinemas carelessly scattered about a town ... A fanatical play-goer would say that it is unimportant where or when a performance takes place: what is important is that it does take place. But this is not true. The varying outward appearances of concert halls, galleries or cinemas often reflect also their essential difference. It is seen firstly as a material difference. The shine and glamour are not necessarily also a proof of greater wealth, but clearly express a tendency to extravagance, and all forms of pomp and glitter. Subsidised theatres reflect this atmosphere even when under the pressure of considerable financial embarrassments. They are created to be representative. Such theatres, usually bearing the title 'national', occupy a central urban position. Their presence marks not only the administrative but also the cultural centre of the town. The main theatre of a town is in many ways like the main church. With its impressive exterior and its conservative repertoire, this sanctuary of culture gathers its disciples and followers like a special caste in which, nonetheless, there are internal differences. That such differences exist, is obvious from the beginning to every architect of a theatre hall. From Greek times, around the orchestra (*proeddria*) an area was reserved for the priesthood, *archonts* and honoured guests. In Rome the orchestra (*cavea*) of the time became an integral part of the auditorium, with seats for the distinguished; in baroque Italy the theatres had several rows of boxes, in which the rich and the privileged could be separated from the crowd ... But the theatre is not just an auditorium and a stage: a multitude of other areas, public and private, enable the auditorium to be comfortable and the stage luxurious. The select public considers it its civilised duty to attend performances in such theatres. The young actor feels it an immense success to appear on its stage, the famous company willingly plays there. Everything in this type of theatre is full of its own symbolism: massive entrance doors, heavy curtains at the windows, masks on the walls ... As if this gilt and impressiveness were compressed into this typical theatre symbolism, that clearly indicates that this is the place of the theatre and

that it is the theatre that is the centre of its symbol. And just this ornament that encourages an awareness of the individual and general history of the theatre and its authentic function, makes it that in such spaces a bad performance appears yet worse, for it is in contradiction both to its surroundings and to their tradition. It is expected of reputable auditoria that they be always the hosts to the best. In giving them the title of 'the temple of art', their audience expects and demands, over and over again, a festival of the theatre, over and over again, a film festival, over and over again, a miracle of painting. Famous venues are the ritual locations of art: in them art is deified and worshipped. And the more famous the venue, the more striking the disappointment evoked by the failure of a performance held therein, a disappointment that can grow into utter disgust and open opposition to the official institution of culture in which the spirit of bureaucracy has suppressed creativity, and where art officials have replaced the authentic artist, officials who, only for formal reasons, may be called actors, writers, directors. This confirms that the theatre is not just a building, not just stone and a name; the means is not enough to attain its end. The institution of art is not an artistic institution by what is institutional, but by what is creative. Otherwise, all there is, is the institution. Hence, the central venues of cultural activity cannot prove their central role by their location, but, above all, by their creative conception. In the opposite case, even the most representative auditorium may soon be filled with gloom.

Great cultural institutions must be in the centre of the town. In this way, in a formal sense, their elitism, their importance is affirmed, through which is demonstrated the society that supports them, but also their isolation and individuality which turns them into a sort of cultural ghetto. But where 'central' theatres exist, others soon spring up. The retreat from the institutional - to which art does not belong from its very beginning - creates alternative groups which, in the final count, also turn into particular institutions. Everything which occurs in the bourgeois society is a part of that society, including even its negation. Driven to the margins of the official, the off-theatres and similar related artistic colonies attempt to play the role of cultural guerrillas, who, from their peripheral positions, attack the fortified centre. The venues of such alternative groups scarcely merit the name of gallery or theatre, for usually they are God-forsaken premises, which clearly illustrate the groups' material and

social position and, at the same time, bear witness to their undoubted enthusiasm, which accepts many hardships, in order to achieve their project, which is amateurism in its original sense. As the official culture greets them with disgust and contempt - as distinct from the companies of dilettantes whom the same society strives to preserve in the status of a 'sacred pauper' and harmless fun - the members of alternative groups begin in every way to consider their being ignored and disqualified as their advantage, for it is a proof of their difference from the stultified forms of culture. Their performances are not advertised in the main daily press, yet still the public easily finds them. True lovers of art will drag themselves to the periphery, if they consider that it is a cultural 'centre'. They will not be put off by the modest auditorium nor by the hard seats, if the performance deserves their attention. They will not miss even the usual theatre programmes and leaflets (with their inevitable resemblance to a menu), since they consider themselves to be initiated in all manner of cultural events. Such initiation gives birth to a new exclusiveness - the exclusiveness of the connoisseur. Their judgement creates a reputation for prestige of the non-institutional artistic trends, which results in the gradual enthronement of a hierarchical relationship between related alternative trends, identical to that between similar institutions of official culture. And so some such 'location', even against its wishes, enters the sphere of the socially desirable. Even its external shabbiness, especially in affluent society, is considered an attraction, by which its necessary poverty is hypocritically described as artistic eccentricity. And while the off-theatre, at least indirectly, is included in the democratised cultural public, so the elite and subversive artistic trends, each in its own way, carry their exclusiveness to a point of extremity, be it by withdrawal to salons in which music is performed for the initiated, be it in flats where 'private performances' are organised which, for one reason or another, must be hidden from the public eye. A completely opposite tendency is expressed in the 'abolition' of the institution of the auditorium and the attempt at the complete democratisation of the theatrical performance, when the institution is abandoned and goes 'to the people', which in the main harms the performance and scarcely interests the people. Every more experienced man of the theatre knows that the demand for an adequate stage is not whimsical. One might even, to some extent, say that the 'original' of a performance may be seen only in its original staging, in other

words, on the stage in which the performance first arose. Every other staging demands adaptations and undesirable compromises.

At first glance, the film does not suffer such problems. Its projections affirm that it is a case of a more democratic art. Many are the film makers who have begun to create their visual culture in suburban cultural centres and community halls, where worn copies rotated with the obligatory pause for changing the reel, and a seat could be guaranteed only if members of the audience brought themselves some sort of a chair from home. In open-air cinemas the atmosphere is completed by refreshments, propaganda films are shown on squares, drive-in cinemas may be entered by car, cinemas with continual performance are adapted to the audience's free time, dubbing - which is, in any case, a desecration of art - attempts to facilitate the understanding of the film ... But only where the cinema hall is equipped to perfection, does the showing of a film have the full status of an artistic event. In such locations, with set times of showing and with numbered seats, it becomes clear that the cinema is an institute of culture. (In any case, by a careless entry during the 'peak' performance, shows that the perpetrator fails to respect the film and to understand the role of the film maker.) In a well-equipped film theatre (*teatros*) the screen is covered by a curtain which, like the curtain in a theatre, conceals the mystery and which is, in the real sense, 'raised' only when the public is absorbed by the illusion. In the cinema hall, however, the solemn silence that accompanies theatrical performances is often lacking, which does not only point to the difference between cinema and theatre audiences being due to their 'origins' - since the cinema hall has grown out of the circus tent, while the theatre has risen out of the ecclesiastical mystery - but to the awareness of the absence of the living actor, whereas, in the moment of complete involvement in the theatre, it is the opposite, the awareness of his presence. Fear of Porter's 'zooming' has never ceased ...

The artist desires that his work be adequately presented, the spectator expects it. For this reason a suitable performance area is that in which everything serves illusion. Distrust of unsuitable venues is a distrust of the possibility of presenting the work in an adequate way. In improvised 'galleries', lacking necessary lighting, in halls with bad acoustics, with bad screens, copies

and projectors, the work is not what it is. The lack of essential technical conditions undermines true perception. In such conditions the theatrical or cinema performance is often no more than 'information' about the show, so it is not merely due to chance that the performers themselves take little care for such performances. From this point of view, the performers' elitism is of the essence, for basically it represents a demand that their efforts be treated with care and dignity. Their dependence on material/technical equipment is nonetheless indirect and conditional and only partly in their power: the social hierarchy which has occupied a position in the treatment of culture, does not reflect culture, but society. It wishes to exalt itself in culture, but more often negates itself in the way it treats it. Hence, every praise of a society for its cultural attainments is also a concealment of what that society fails to do for culture.

[www.predragfinci.com](http://www.predragfinci.com)