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The street as Total Theatre: a sound tour through reality with Rimini Protokoll

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses *The Walks*, a sound experience created by the German collective Rimini Protokoll. The piece offers a theatrical journey through urban spaces via a mobile application. The analysis is supported by a bespoke analysis sheet, designed as a methodological instrument that combines categories of convivial, technovivial and liminal art with theatrical semiotics, in order to assess the theatricality of the work and to observe the relationships established between the piece, the spectator and the urban space. The research demonstrates that, despite the physical absence of actors, *The Walks* generates a liminal experience in which the participant simultaneously acts as both spectator and performer. In doing so, it creates an expanded form of theatre in which the city becomes both stage and dramaturgy. Furthermore, the article establishes a theoretical link with Erwin Piscator's Total Theatre project, updating his political proposal through direct immersion in urban reality. In this sense, the results show that Rimini Protokoll's piece re-signifies contemporary non-places and redefines the relationship between art, technology and public space.

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Introduction: the city and the sound

In 2021, the German multidisciplinary artistic collective Rimini Protokoll created *The Walks*, a sound fiction work composed of 10 audio pieces, each lasting between 15 and 30 minutes. Together, they propose a walk through various commonplace locations in any city. This work, which does not sit comfortably within the taxonomy of either the performing arts or live arts, offers a range of theatrical elements that allow for a conceptual exploration of the relationship between the piece and the spectator, through two of its central components: urban space and sound.

As posited by Augé (2017), supermodernity has saturated cities with non-places – spaces such as large shopping centres, motorways and airports – where it is impossible to develop either individual or relational identities. Such spaces turn cities into vast producers of loneliness and sameness. Within theatrical practices that take place in the streets, outside traditional theatre buildings, we can find a kind of theatre that treats the city

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merely as a stage. However, there are also practices that engage directly with the city, which, according to Carreira (2017), treat the city itself as a dramaturgical element – sometimes even the central one – and have the potential to re-signify the non-places described by Augé.

Regarding sound, Antón Patiño (2017) speaks of the near-total hegemony of the image in our era and its overwhelming social consumption, which entails the disciplining of the gaze. In contrast, sound becomes a medium that sits outside this frenetic rhythm of consumption. Furthermore, Irati Agirreazkuenaga and Mikel Ayllon (2023) remind us that, despite its habitual subordination to the image, sound is capable of independently carrying the weight of narrative construction. It has the potential to bridge the fictional and the real, forging a deeper connection between the creator and the audience.

The use of headphone-delivered sound to choreograph a listener's movement through everyday space also has its own lineage: from the soundwalking tradition developed within Acoustic Ecology (Drever 2009; Schafer 1977) to the audio walks of Janet Cardiff (Beil 2007), a direct precedent for the walking listener that *The Walks* presupposes. This article, however, does not approach the piece as soundscape composition; rather, it examines sound semiotically, as one of the sign systems of an expanded theatricality.

The article proceeds as follows: it first establishes the theoretical coordinates – conviviality, theatrical semiotics and the theatre–city relationship – from which the analysis tool is constructed; it then applies this tool to one chapter of *The Walks*; and it finally discusses the results in the light of Dubatti's liminality and Piscator's Total Theatre.

The street as a relational stage

According to Dubatti, 'the theatrical convivio is the gathering of artists, technicians and spectators at a territorial and temporal crossroads of everyday life' (2015, 44), where technological mediation is absent. In contrast to the convivio, he introduces the concept of the technovivio: 'The opposite of the convivio is the technovivio, that is, living culture that is deterritorialised through technological mediation' (44). Within this space, he identifies two types: The first is the interactive technovivio, in which a connection exists between two or more people via a technological tool, such as a phone or an online game. The second is the monoactive form, in which no such connection exists, with the only actors being a person and a machine.

Finally, Dubatti (2021) refers to liminal art as a kind of hybrid space navigating between the convivio and the technovivio. He offers some examples of such works, though without delving deeply into its taxonomy. The term itself demands caution: unlike the anthropological liminality of Turner (1982) —a transitional phase within ritual process – or Fischer-Lichte's (2008) use of the concept to name the transformative threshold experience undergone by the spectator, Dubatti's liminality designates an ontological in-between of modes of artistic existence, and it is in this restricted sense that the term is used throughout this article.

Within theatrical semiology, Fischer-Lichte (1999) defines a set of signs that are only possible and imaginable in the theatre – a semiotic repertoire that constitutes a kind of essence of theatre: 'A acts in a certain way (1), with a specific physical appearance (2), and in a given space (3)' (Fischer-Lichte 1999, 37). Based on these three foundational factors, Fischer-Lichte constructs a classification of signs divided into four main categories: the

actor's activity, with language-based signs and kinetic signs; the actor's appearance, including signs relating to mask, hairstyle, or costume; spatial signs, both in terms of spatial conception and elements related to the scenic space, such as set design, props or lighting; and non-verbal acoustic signs, such as sounds and music.

As in the case of *The Walks*, the site of the theatrical act is not always a stage. This is why André Carreira's (2017) conceptualisation of theatre performed in the street is particularly relevant for this research. According to Carreira, the label 'street theatre' no longer adequately captures the diversity of performance forms that have left behind the traditional theatre space. Carreira reframes street theatre as 'invasion theatre' (2017, 16), encompassing a multifaceted theatrical practice 'characterised by its dialogue with the city or, more precisely, by invading and occupying the city' (17).

When street theatre performances confront passers-by with expressive languages and forms that transcend familiar spectacular models, they engage in a process that disrupts traditional mechanisms of reception for theatre in public space. In doing so, a new set of relational dynamics is established, which 'engages the audience both in discovering the rules of the performance and in interpreting how the performance functions within the structure of the streets' (Carreira 2017, 141).

This shift in the spectator's role connects *The Walks* with a wider genealogy of participatory and instruction-based performance. Practices such as Rotozaza's *Etiquette* (2007) and the *autoteatro* format developed by Ant Hampton and Silvia Mercuriali – including audio-guided pieces for everyday spaces, such as Mercuriali's supermarket walk *Wondermart* (2009) – dispense with the physically present performer and delegate the realisation of the piece to participants who execute recorded instructions. As White (2013) argues, such invitations reconfigure the aesthetics of theatrical reception, making participation itself the medium of the work. Rimini Protokoll thus operates within an area of practice in which the paradigm of the proscenium spectator has already been displaced by that of the participant.

Within this relationship with the city and its citizens, space assumes particular importance as a polysemic container. For Carreira (2017), the city itself is a dramaturgy with which artists and spectators engage in dialogue, and 'must be taken as a pre-text for the theatre that inhabits it' (29). This idea connects directly with Augé's (2017) concept of the non-place – spaces stripped of their anthropological meaning – which, according to Carreira (2017), can be re-signified as places through the relational force of the theatrical event.

This idea of a work's relational potential is further developed by Bourriaud (2017), questioning whether it is still possible to generate relationships with the world in a field like art, which has traditionally been devoted to mere representation. For Bourriaud (2017), each artwork can be defined as a relational object – as the geometric locus of negotiation between numerous senders and receivers – which renders art a state of encounter. And when art strives to encompass and problematise this relational sphere, it enacts, in Bourriaud's words, 'a political project' (2017, 16).

Piscator and the total theatre

It was precisely this need to develop a political project that led Piscator, in the early twentieth century, to commission the physical construction of the Total Theatre from

architect and Bauhaus director Walter Gropius, in order to fully realise the potential of his political theatre. As Martínez López and Girona (2023) document, following Piscator's instructions, Gropius designed a building that perfectly embodied the synthesis of art and stage technology, with the aim of mobilising the masses. It was conceived as an oval-shaped theatre supported by 12 columns (Gropius in Piscator 2001), architecturally based on the forms of the ellipse and the circle. The goal was to adapt the stage to the three basic theatrical models: the proscenium stage, the circus, and the Greek/Elizabethan theatre, while ensuring that the entire audience – approximately two thousand spectators – seated concentrically within the ellipse (which, like in panoramic rotundas, could rotate), could enjoy the same acoustic and visual conditions. This immersive setup aimed to draw the spectator into the action and dissolve the boundary between the world of reality and the world of fiction.

In the words of Piscator himself, as cited by César de Vicente Hernando (2013):

These technical elements of the modern stage make possible the representation of the epic drama of the future, which will create a universal scenic art with all its relationships and contexts. The stage that is to represent the world must represent it in its entirety. (69)

In the end, however, the theatre building envisioned by Piscator was never constructed.

Materials and methodology

In order to analyse the main dramaturgical characteristics and the semiotic-semiological elements of Rimini Protokoll's *The Walks*, and subsequently to study the work's proposed relationship with the spectator, a bespoke analysis tool (Table 1) was developed. This sheet is based on the four axes of variables identified by Fischer-Lichte (1999) for semiotic analysis in theatre: the actor's activity, the actor's appearance, space, and sound. These variables were further organised into three overarching coordinates – artist, audience, and space – drawing on Dubatti's (2015) theory of the convivio.

The analysis sheet is used to verify the presence or absence of the aforementioned signs, identify their general content where applicable, and determine their relationship to the fundamental dramaturgical coordinates of artist, audience, and space. This enables a systematic approach to data collection concerning the presence of signs and allows empirical data to be extracted in order to draw precise conclusions. The sheet is conceived as a heuristic reading tool at the service of the present case study; its systematic application to other liminal works remains a task for future research. The presence of each sign was categorised as present, absent, or diffuse: a sign was deemed diffuse when its realisation depends on the participant's discretionary execution and therefore cannot be guaranteed or fully specified by the work itself.

As for the case study itself, *The Walks* comprises 10 chapters, each of which can be activated independently, as they are not narratively connected. The piece is distributed internationally as a paid mobile application of the same name, available on the major app stores, where it remains accessible (Rimini Protokoll 2021). What they share is that they all unfold in various generic urban spaces, which are chosen by the participant.

The general characteristics across all chapters are similar, so for the purpose of this research, the chapter titled *Departure, let's go!* was selected, in its Spanish-language version. This chapter was chosen because it is designed for a single participant, which

Table 1. Analysis tool.

GENERAL DATA		
TITLE	Departure, let's go!	
DURATION	16 minutes	
TOPIC	Orientation in the city	
TRACKS / STAGES	Preparations: Participant's home / Departure: A frequently travelled path / Orientation: Walking through the city / Looking around: A place to stop / Getting lost: A path to get lost / Epilogue: Photo gallery	
ARTIST		
	Presence yes/ no	Content
VOICES	Yes	1. Human female voice 2. Synthetic female voice
Linguistic Signs	Yes	HUMAN VOICE Functions: - Appellative: Commands related to walking - Representative: Knowledge transmission on the subject - Expressive: Anger, humour - Metalinguistic: Jokes about script translation, grammatical errors. Subjective level: Self-referential story Intersubjective level: Direct communication with the participant Substituting other signs: Continuous references to space Functions: - Appellative: Commands related to walking - Representative: Announces the title of each track/stage
Paralinguistic Signs	Yes	HUMAN VOICE Subjective: tone, timbre, accent, cadenceIntersubjective: exclamation, questioning, laughter.
BODIES	No	
Mask	No	
Hairstyle	No	
Costume	No	
AUDIENCE		
	Presence yes/no	Content
PARTICIPANTS	Yes	One
Gestural Signs	Diffuse	Photographing the sky. Offering paper and pen to another person. Photographing the map drawn by another person.
Proxemic Signs	Diffuse	Stereophonic sound Approaching another person.
TECHNOLOGICAL TOOL	Yes	A mobile device: launches audio, confirms track progress, takes photos, searches for a location Internet connection Headphones (optional) Participants are also asked to carry pen and paper
SPACE		
	Presence yes/no	Content
LOCATION OF THE VOICES	Diffuse	Unknown.
PARTICIPANT'S LOCATION	Yes	Everyday space: Home and city streets

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

GENERAL DATA		
Spatial Signs	Diffuse	Fictional space: Narrated space (signs of signs). Linguistic signs + substitute non-verbal acoustic signs: Continuous spatial references. Real space: Lived space (<i>signs</i>) Photo gallery
Non-Verbal Acoustic Signs	Yes	Signs related to the object-space. Noises: traffic, footsteps, slamming doors, crowd murmurs, birds, wind, supermarket trolley. Music: electronic/synthetic.

Source: Compiled by the author based on Fischer-Lichte (1999) and Dubatti (2015).

facilitates its analysis and allows for more specific findings. Moreover, it was ensured that the selected chapter contained a sufficient variety of elements to allow for a meaningful analysis. Since the chapters are narratively independent and structurally analogous, each constitutes an autonomous unit of analysis, and the selected chapter therefore functions as an instrumental case. Admittedly, chapters requiring several participants or different sensory configurations might inflect some of these findings; their comparative analysis remains a task for future research.

Results

The artist

For the artist’s domain, this study analyses the semiotic elements of the voices heard in the audio of this piece, as these vocal performances most closely align with the category of ‘artist’ as defined by Dubatti (2015) in his theories of the convivio and technovivio.

The piece features two disembodied voices with distinct interpretative functions. On the one hand, there is a female character with a human voice, who acts as the guide for the work and directs the main actions that the spectator or participant must carry out. This voice has the most prominent presence in the audio.

On the other hand, there is a synthetic-sounding female voice. It is not possible to determine whether the voice is genuinely human or artificially generated, though its presence is minimal and largely testimonial.

Linguistic signs

Given the absence of the performer’s body, linguistic signs carry a disproportionate share of the work’s semiotic weight, which justifies opening the analysis with them. First, as Fischer-Lichte (1999) points out, it is important to consider the basic functions of language as outlined by Bühler.

In the synthetic voice’s interventions, two of these functions are observed. Firstly, the appellative function appears when the participant is given an instruction. Secondly, when the voice announces the titles of each track or the overall chapter title, it is employing the representative function of language.

In the case of the human voice, the function within the work is more diverse, and so too are the linguistic uses. It shares both representative and appellative functions with the synthetic voice. This character also issues various commands to the participant, clearly demonstrating use of the appellative function. As with the synthetic voice, it transmits knowledge – though in this case, more thoroughly and in greater depth – thus employing the representative function, for instance, when explaining how satellite signals work. In addition to these two, the expressive function is also present, particularly when the character expresses emotion or feeling – such as at the beginning of the chapter, when she displays irritation as she urges the participant to leave their home, or later, when she jokes playfully about the problems encountered in translating the script. Lastly, there is also a metalinguistic function, specifically when the character explains a translation issue related to cultural equivalence.

On a subjective level, the clearest example of a self-referential sign occurs when the voice addresses the participant in the penultimate track, narrating a personal experience related to her own way of relating to the city. The information provided is confined to this experience, and the participant is left unable to determine whether the story belongs to the realm of fiction or reality. In any case, the voice speaks in the first person, referring to a very specific element of the urban landscape – a supermarket – and the joy or peace it evoked when she saw it upon returning home, as it represented a sign of nearness to her house. The supermarket here plays a dual role: as a common urban feature – which the participant may also encounter along their walk – and as a personal point of reference that evokes a feeling of peace.

On an intersubjective level, numerous signs contribute to establishing the relationship between the voice and the participant. As previously noted, such signs help define the dynamics between two characters, but in this work, they also provide clues about the relationship between the artist and the audience – or more precisely, the voice and the participant. Based on these signs, the relationship appears intimate. From the very first track, the voice adopts a casual register that implies familiarity or mutual knowledge in the way it urges the participant to leave the house. Later in the chapter, the voice asks the participant to answer questions that, although not overtly personal, are sufficiently reflective to be unlikely shared with a stranger. In this way, a bond of trust and recognition is established between the two main figures in the piece. These questions also trigger specific thoughts in the participant's mind, generating concrete signs that contribute to the overall work. These signs become evident as the participant follows the commands given by the voice. For example, when instructed to walk along a familiar path, the participant must choose a route and thus create a subjective sign that helps complete the experience. Furthermore, a secondary figure is introduced into the reception of the work: the occasional passer-by, who witnesses and interprets the participant's behaviour and signs.

Paralinguistic signs

Both voices heard in this chapter exhibit clear paralinguistic signs.

Firstly, there are subjective signs that reveal characteristics of the character. In the case of the synthetic voice, the tone and even the accent suggest that it is not human – or has been processed to sound artificial—, though it does retain a timbre that, due to its pitch, might be associated with a female voice. The human voice, by contrast, has a tone more

typically associated with a real person and shares the high-pitched timbre characteristic of a woman with the synthetic voice. Its measured cadence conveys a sense of calm, although in the first track – during the aforementioned display of irritation – and in the fourth track – when joking about the translation – the cadence and volume become livelier. In this way, and in contrast to the synthetic voice, the modulation of tone helps reinforce the human character of the voice.

Bodies

With regard to the appearance of the actor as sign, analysis is not possible, since this piece does not involve a physical performer. There are therefore no masks, costumes, or hairstyles to act as signs. As already mentioned, the work consists of a voice for the main character and a secondary voice.

The audience

In analysing the audience component, the focus has been placed – barring one exception – on the semiotic elements related to the participant in the piece, that is, the person who activates the audio and prepares to receive it. As previously noted, the participant occupies a role that goes beyond that of a mere observer, positioning themselves in an intermediate space between receiver and performer. In this sense, they also form part of the work and become a creator of signs that, in turn, may be observed by others.

In the analysed chapter, the number of participants required for the piece is one.

Gestural signs

Throughout the piece, the voice prompts the participant to carry out a series of actions that result in specific gestures, which in turn complete the semiotic content of the work.

The first and most recurrent gesture is walking. The participant must walk while the piece unfolds – or put another way, the piece unfolds as the participant walks. This is therefore a work that is created through walking. Each of the participant's steps becomes a gesture, a sign that gives meaning to the creation and may be observed and interpreted by those nearby. As such, it is a central sign in the work, which revolves around walking in urban spaces. Nevertheless, this gesture can be considered weak or indistinct – despite its central role – because the piece does not dictate how the gesture should be performed. That is, there is no specification as to whether the steps should be short or long, fast or slow, confident or hesitant.

Alongside the instruction to take photographs, the final action requested of the participant in the last track is to approach a passer-by (to be discussed under proxemic signs) and ask them to draw a path – the first path they ever walked alone in the city. The act of extending one's arm and offering pen and paper once again constitutes a clear gestural sign on an intersubjective level, illustrating the relationship between these two strangers and reflecting the participant's position as someone asking a favour of a person they do not know.

These gestures performed by the participant are, like those of any actor, signs of signs – in other words, the participant is carrying out instructions given by the artist, who has assumed the role of director. As such, the gesture of taking a photograph or reaching

out to hand over pen and paper becomes a sign that simultaneously represents the real gesture and its symbolic interpretation.

The presence of these signs in the work is not entirely definitive. While the signs do exist, their execution may not be particularly significant or may fail to be fully realised, as their interpretation and performance are left to the discretion of the participant. For this reason, the presence of the gesture is deemed diffuse.

Proxemic signs

The principal proxemic sign observed in the work is the aforementioned act of the participant approaching a passer-by to offer them a pen and paper and ask them to draw the first route they walked alone. This approach, as an intersubjective sign, takes place between two strangers, initiated by the participant, who will choose someone they feel some level of trust towards – a sentiment conveyed through the sign itself. In this case, the gesture does come with slightly more specific guidance, although once again, it is up to the participant to fully interpret and enact the approach. This results once more in a sign of a sign, which, given that the participant is not a trained actor familiar with the piece and does not receive detailed directions, may take on many different forms.

While this sign could have a relatively unambiguous interpretation, as the work provides some degree of instruction, its realisation still depends on the participant's actual performance. It is therefore deemed to be diffusely present, as it might not be carried out at all or may be executed in a manner that deviates from the instruction.

Technological tools

For the participant – categorised here as the audience – to connect with the work, they must use certain technological tools.

First and foremost, they require a mobile device that they can carry with them and that has an internet connection, in order to stream the audio track hosted on the application named after the piece. This app must be downloaded, installed (after purchase), and run on the device. The audio tracks cannot be downloaded directly from the app to the device, so an internet connection is required throughout the entire experience. The device and the internet connection are also necessary to confirm the progression between tracks within the chapter, to upload photographs taken during the piece to the app's gallery, to search for a specific point on the map (twenty thousand kilometres away from their current location), and to access the gallery of photos taken by other participants who have completed the piece.

Although not technological in themselves, the participant is also asked to carry pen and paper, which they will later use to ask a passer-by to draw a route, in order to photograph it afterwards.

The space

In this piece, space is a variable in which artist and audience are differently implicated. Their bodies do not share the same place at the same time. The location of the artist whose voice we hear in the recording is unknown. The participant – understood here as the audience – will be located as directed by the piece: first in their own home, then in the streets of their city. However, the participant is not alone. Through the technological

tools previously described, the artist's voice accompanies them, both at home and throughout the city. In other words, the character (and the signs they carry) and the participant do indeed share the same space and time – albeit not through physical presence. Moreover, they relate to one another in specific ways, through the signs previously observed in the direction of the voice towards the participant, and through cues of feedback in the other direction (such as tapping the mobile screen to confirm an action has been completed).

Spatial signs

Within this shared interstice between voice and participant, several signs relate directly to spatiality.

First, as previously mentioned, there are the linguistic signs used in substitution for spatial signs. These are generally presented in quite generic terms and appear throughout the duration of the track. Examples include: house, path, building, intersection, school, shop, sky, end of the world, unknown land, or supermarket. These are also signs of signs, as they are fictional representations – through speech – of real-world signs such as a house, a path, a school or a shop, embedded into the narrative.

Thus, it can be concluded that spatial signs are indeed present in the work, albeit in a way that is not entirely definitive.

Non-verbal acoustic signs

Throughout the piece – and generally in the background – a wide range of sounds can be heard, relating to the urban environment. The participant hears the sound of footsteps, a slamming door, the murmur of people, or traffic noise when in the street. These referential signs are designed to enhance the participant's immersive experience and to recreate the urban atmosphere being described. At other points, bird calls, the wind, or the sound of a supermarket trolley may be heard – used to evoke specific sensations connected to those signs.

Finally, the work includes a musical soundscape heard in the background at certain moments, especially during looping segments that occur while the participant is expected to carry out an action requested by the voice. The music is entirely instrumental and produced electronically, using synthesisers. This type of music creates a synthetic atmosphere that helps isolate the participant from their immediate urban and human surroundings, thereby granting greater significance – by contrast – to those signs of an intersubjective nature.

In short, non-verbal acoustic signs have a strong presence in this piece.

Critical discussion of results

Between the convivial and the technovivial: a liminal space

The Walks by Rimini Protokoll is not a piece that unfolds within a conventional space for theatrical practice, nor does it adhere to a traditional conception of shared space and time between the bodies of actors and spectators. Nevertheless, as we have seen, a number of indicators point to its theatrical nature and help us understand its relational potential.

The Walks requires the use of a mobile device with internet access in order to activate the piece and carry out its actions. In it, a voice housed in a machine communicates with a person who, as discussed, is located in a specific time and place. According to Dubatti (2021), works in which the only agents involved are a person and a machine fall under the category of monoactive technovivio. However, there are a number of factors that distance *The Walks* from this classification and bring it closer to that of the convivio.

Firstly, it is necessary to problematise the categories of sender and receiver, of actor and spectator, within this piece. The machine's voice continuously employs the appellative function of language, issuing a series of commands to the receiving subject. In this sense, it does not behave like an actor performing a role and being passively observed or listened to by a spectator. The latter, in addition, performs a series of fundamental actions – walking, choosing directions, taking photographs, or establishing relationships with other passers-by – without which the piece would have no meaning and could not be completed. In this way, the spectator becomes a kind of actant, a figure who executes a series of functions, appears as a phenomenological body, and is in turn seen – and, to some extent, interpreted – by other people sharing the same space. Thus, a form of co-presence is established between the spectator-actant and a partial spectator, who, while unable to hear the piece, may observe an individual engaging in an unusual form of dialogue with the city. This dialogue stems from a personal and intimate gaze prompted by the work. This co-presence is grounded in concrete, observable actions: the participant halts to photograph the sky, retraces a familiar route with no apparent destination, or approaches a stranger to offer them pen and paper and ask for the drawing of a route – behaviours that render them legible, and interpretable, to those who share the street. As such, the individual does not behave like just another passer-by in the non-places that saturate any Western city. They become something more than a consumer; they engage with the city through a subjective experience, in a way that sets them apart.

As noted, the location of the voice heard through the machine is unknown – thus, we might speak of an absent artist. Even so, several elements bring this voice closer to the spectator-actant, to the point that one might imagine a shared space between them. Firstly, there are the continuous linguistic signs that substitute for spatial ones. These references, combined with the real spatial references observed and traversed by the spectator-actant, construct a single space – half real, half fictional – shared by both the absent artist and the participant. Secondly, headphones are required to carry out the piece, meaning that the artist's voice is transmitted directly to the spectator-actant with minimal external sound interference. In fact, through stereophonic sound, the piece plays with the perception of proximity between the two agents. We can therefore assert that the voice accompanies the participant on their walk – it is present with them and plays at being present, even if this presence is incorporeal.

Carreira (2017) states that when street theatre presents passers-by with more recognisable expressive languages and forms, it generates a disruption in the traditional processes of theatrical reception. This can clearly be seen in *The Walks*, where the way the spectator relates to the piece, the city, and the rules of interaction is radically different from usual experiences. Two moments of the chapter illustrate this: the instruction to locate on the map a point twenty thousand kilometres away, which abruptly resituates the everyday street within a planetary scale; and the request to deliberately choose a path in which to get

lost, which suspends the functional logic that ordinarily governs urban walking. This reconfigures the citizen's relationship with their city, where space becomes a polysemic container. For Carreira (2017), the city itself is a dramaturgy with which artists and spectators engage in dialogue, and it must be considered a pre-text for the theatre that inhabits it. *The Walks*, however, goes even further: it turns the city into the living text of the work, shaped through spatial linguistic references and reconfigured through the theatrical act it invites the spectator-actant to perform. The result is a space that is re-signified in the eyes of both the participant and the observing passers-by.

This centrality of space, which mediates the relationships discussed above, stands in contrast to Dubatti's (2021) belief that technoviviality necessarily involves the deterritorialisation of action. In this regard, it is useful to return to the semiotic origins of site-specific practices, which help to contextualise the position of this work. As Kwon (2004) notes, in such works, space is not merely a geographical or architectural location, but rather a network of social relationships, that is, a community.

In conclusion, although *The Walks* requires the use of a technological device as intermediary, its spatial and relational dimensions are significant enough to prevent it from being categorised as a technovivial artwork.

All of this places *The Walks* within the liminal space described by Dubatti (2021) —a space that appears broad and varied, and which therefore calls for a new taxonomy to conceptualise in greater detail the range of artistic proposals that inhabit it and will continue to do so. This liminal space seems the most appropriate framework for the present case study and offers a means of transcending the dialectical opposition between convivial and technovivial art.

Theatre after the actor

Fischer-Lichte (1999) defines a series of semiotic elements for analysing a theatrical work. It is precisely through these signs that theatre is able to configure itself as a meaning-bearing product.

In *The Walks*, most of these signs are present, but not all. This is particularly the case for signs related to the actor's physical presence – those that allow analysis of mask, hairstyle, or costume. As previously noted, the artist's body is absent from this piece, making it impossible to derive any meaning from their physical appearance. While a body is indeed present – that of the spectator-actant who performs various actions – their appearance is neither defined by the work nor endowed with any particular significance. Moreover, their appearance is unknowable in advance, as each time the piece is performed, a different person will embody the role.

According to Fischer-Lichte (1999), the only truly problematic absence is that of kinetic signs, since, she asserts, it is only theoretically imaginable for a theatre to renounce this type of sign and instead rely on linguistic and paralinguistic signs, as well as music, noises, light, set design, and other elements that do not require the actor's corporeality. As already mentioned, in *The Walks* the actors' bodies are not present, and all movement-related signs are of a diffuse nature, as they are solely attributable to the spectator-actant in their capacity as actant, experienced by them as a spectator, and only tangentially observable by passers-by as external spectators.

In other words, if theatre necessarily requires semiotic movement, *The Walks* only provides movement as a phenomenological event. However, as this study has shown, that does not necessarily preclude it from being considered theatre.

A final question arises here: what happens if the participant simply does not execute the instructions? Far from invalidating the analysis, this possibility is constitutive of the piece. *The Walks* delegates the completion of its signs to the participant, and, as Breel (2024) argues, participatory agency implies precisely that the outcome of the invitation cannot be guaranteed. It is for this reason that the corresponding signs have been categorised as diffuse rather than present: the work exists as a repertoire of virtual signs that are actualised – or not – in each singular execution.

Reality: the total theatre

The Walks is a clear example of how to construct a fictional artefact from fragments of reality. As noted by Carreira (2017) and Kwon (2004), site-specific works that treat space not as a mere insignificant backdrop but as an environment to be engaged with – and that, in one way or another, becomes part of the dramaturgy – establish a dialogue with their surroundings that enables the re-signification of both space and the relationships within it. *The Walks* not only refers to real life – it takes place within it and becomes part of it.

This collective component is manifested subtly in *The Walks* through a brief interaction with a passer-by, as well as in the viewing of a shared photo gallery at the end of the journey. *The Walks* not only asks the spectator-actant to recall their past relationship with the city, but it also creates a space for collective reflection when it asks them to invite another person on the street to undertake the same reflective exercise, to photograph that reflection as it appears on a piece of paper, and to share it afterwards – at a different moment in time – with other participants around the world. The walking practice proposed by the piece is, in this sense, an heir to the Situationist *dérive* – the unplanned drift through urban ambiances theorised by Debord (1958) as a means of contesting the programmed uses of the city – and to psychogeography's attention to how the urban environment conditions affect and behaviour. This small gesture expands on Lavery's claim that engaging with the city in a manner different from what is programmed allows the spectator to step outside capitalist structures and grants them greater agency. In addition, the participant adopts an interstitial behaviour of cooperation and symbolic connection with another person – an act that holds powerful subversive potential. This goes beyond what Hancox (2012) describes when asserting that the city should become the space of art, as envisioned by the Situationists. Rather, it suggests that artistic practice can hold a subversive potential rooted in transcending individual experience. All this is possible, as Breel (2024) argues, because the fictional context of the work provides the spectator-actant with a conscious framework of participation and agency, enabling them to take on a more political position within their everyday lived experience.

Thus, while maintaining certain elements inherent to traditional theatre, as previously discussed, *The Walks* aligns itself with the performative paradigm described by Juan Antonio Sánchez (2011), without aiming to represent a constantly changing world, but instead to manifest it. *The Walks* performs a fiction with aspirations to reality – a fiction constructed as reality, aware that, as Sánchez (2011) notes, reality is continuously mutating and, at some point, fiction may become reality. And to do so, it does not forget

the power of collective action, even if it manifests it tentatively – perhaps from that marginal space to which everything that does not conform to the maintenance of basic structures of subjectivity has been relegated. *The Walks* is theatre in the sense that theatre is a fictional space that, at times, imitates reality, and at others, seeks to shape it.

Long live piscator!

The social circumstances that accompanied the rise of industrialisation, the growth of the working masses, and the revolutionary period in which Piscator theorised and practised his documentary theatre are very different from those of the present day. For this reason, some of the tools of political theatre – especially that which seeks to intervene in the reality it addresses – have also changed. De Vicente (2016) identifies the abandonment of plot, the radical historicity of its discourse, the scientific articulation of its elements, and its constitution as a construction of reality as some of the core tenets of political theatre. In many ways, all of these are present in *The Walks*, but one more element should be added – one that refers, as seen throughout this article, to subjectivity in the construction of discourse. This subjectivity need not contradict scientific, historical, or objective modes of thought; rather, it can be understood as a point of departure towards social construction – a near-inevitable refuge given the relentless erosion of the collective.

Despite the historical transformations that have occurred, it is still possible to find parallels between the foundations of Piscator's theatre and those employed by Rimini Protokoll in shaping *The Walks*. A thread runs between these two conceptions of political theatre. Gimber (2016) and De Vicente (2013) point to some of Piscator's defining traits, including the insertion of reality in order to explain the new social relations of the time; an alternative approach to staging, aimed at creating a theatrical apparatus capable of accommodating those insertions of reality; and a new relationship between artists and spectators. These principles are clearly present in *The Walks*, though, as expected, enacted through a different praxis than that of Piscator.

Here, the insertion of reality becomes an immersion in reality. One might say there has been a shift in direction: it is not reality that is inserted into *The Walks*, but rather *The Walks* that inserts itself into reality. To this end, Rimini Protokoll employs the most effective form of staging – a simple technological device embedded in everyday life – and the grandest and most effective of all possible scenographies: the real city, with all its symbolic relations to which the participant is exposed. This approach fundamentally alters the relationship between artist and audience, distancing it from the conventions of bourgeois theatre. The participant is no longer merely a spectator – indeed, they scarcely spectate at all – but rather carries out a series of actions, rooted in walking and active observation, which afford them greater agency and, by extension, greater responsibility.

Policano (2018) observes that Rimini Protokoll's work over the past decade has revolved around 'participatory performances closer to play than theatre, in some way restoring the audience's ability to make decisions and construct, collectively, the liminality of fiction and reality' (9). This still holds true in *The Walks*, even though – as we have seen – the sense of collective construction is more diffuse, and subjectivity remains the primary lens through which collectivity is approached.

This last point should not be understated, for it marks the strongest tension between the two projects. Piscator's Total Theatre was conceived to engineer a collective, mass

political experience: an architecture designed to place two thousand spectators simultaneously under identical acoustic and visual conditions. *The Walks*, by contrast, is a solo and asynchronous experience. What the piece proposes is therefore not the replication of Piscator's ambition but its displacement: the collective is no longer assembled within a building, but deferred and reconstructed through asynchronous traces – the encounter with the passer-by, the shared photo gallery – in a historical context marked precisely by the erosion of the collective. The claim that *The Walks* realises the Total Theatre must be read within this displacement, and not as a literal equivalence.

This liminality between fiction and reality remains the cornerstone of Rimini Protokoll's theatre. Carnevali (2016) notes that instead of mimesis and representation, the collective presents the 'world-object' directly to the audience. One might go further and say that in *The Walks*, the world-object is not merely presented – it is performed. It is built with each step taken by the participant, shaped by their symbolic input, and altered with every gaze. As Dreyse (2010) affirms, this way of linking the subjective with the collective, of transforming the personal into the social, and of embedding fiction in reality positions Rimini Protokoll as a challenger of theatricality – not to negate it, but to expand it, and thus continue the pursuit initiated by Piscator and others for a political theatre capable of questioning the construct of reality and playing a decisive role in its transformation.

It is worth highlighting one final connection between Piscator and this work by Rimini Protokoll. As Martínez López and Girona (2023) describe, one of Piscator's main tools for embedding reality into fiction was the use of audiovisual media – a medium just emerging at the time and one closely associated with reality and the conveyance of truth. In a sense, the image was a revolutionary element. That is why Gropius, at Piscator's request, included a series of screens in various parts of the Total Theatre. Following a vertiginous evolution of the audiovisual world and the omnipresence of image in our contemporary lives – as noted by Patiño (2017) – screens have now lost the aura of truth they once held. In *The Walks*, the chosen medium to convey the meaning of the piece and to embed reality within it is sound. Sound emerges as a response to the omnipotence of the image, asserting itself as the true carrier of real signs. This aligns with Beil's (2007) assertion that noise and sound can generate a fully physical space of experience.

Conclusions

The Walks contains the majority of the semiotic signs that Fischer-Lichte identifies as necessary components of a theatrical work. Nevertheless, the piece also includes a range of more diffuse signs owing to its particular characteristics, which bring it closer to disciplines such as performance art and sound art. This hybrid conception is precisely what prevents *The Walks* from fitting neatly into either of Dubatti's two broad categories – convivial or technovivial – and instead places it within a less-explored liminal terrain.

The Walks follows in the footsteps of the documentary theatre pioneered by Piscator, but with a markedly stronger presence of reality, both in terms of the dramatic space and the actant of the piece. This classification as documentary theatre reveals a relationship between the theoretical framework of this work and the principles developed by Erwin Piscator in the last century, within what is known as political theatre and, more specifically, in line with the

underlying ideas of his Total Theatre project – particularly regarding the use of reality and the multidimensional relationship between audience and artist.

The Total Theatre dreamt of by Piscator – the structure he commissioned from Walter Gropius in order to realise his theatrical ideas, to insert reality into fiction and establish a new relationship with the audience – is transformed into the street itself in *The Walks* by Rimini Protokoll. A place where reality and the sonic fiction of the piece overlap, and where the audience becomes the executor of actions that radically alter their experience of both the work and their environment.

In a certain sense, there was no need to build a new building – a new ‘home’ – in which to break with bourgeois naturalism and project a new theatricality. Instead, it was necessary, on the one hand, to follow Brecht’s directives to the letter – as Sánchez (2011) reminds us – by abandoning the house and adopting the city as the only possible home. And, on the other hand, time needed to pass, along with the emergence of a multitude of practices striving towards that very goal.

In other words, in *The Walks* by Rimini Protokoll, the city finally becomes the Total Theatre envisioned by Piscator – albeit a Total Theatre that no longer gathers the masses within a single building, but disperses them, one walker at a time, across the streets of the world.

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